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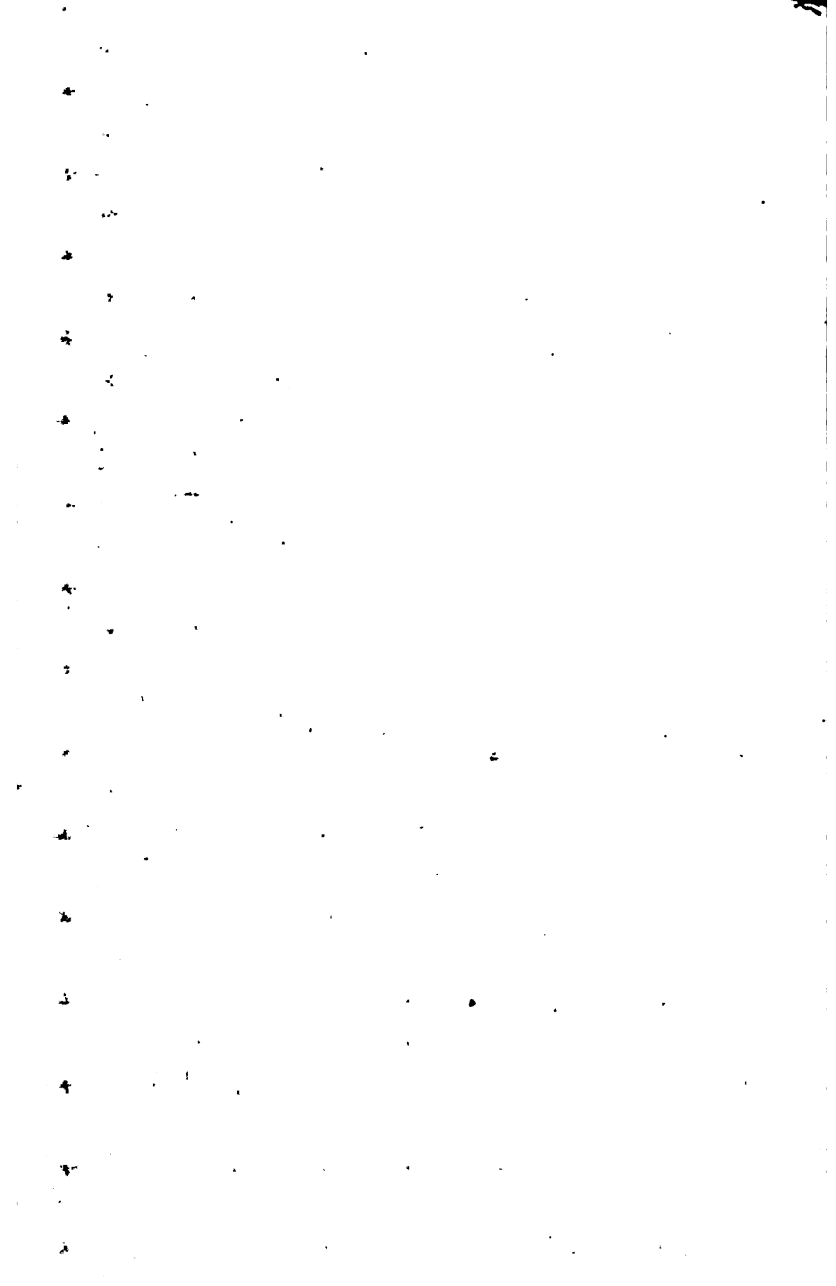
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GIFT OF





THE JOYOUS TROUBLE MAKER

BY

JACKSON GREGORY

Author of "The Outlaw," "The Short Cut,"
"Wolf Breed," etc.

WITH FRONTISPIECE IN COLOR BY

FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON



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Class of 1900

"*Lotus.*" . . . The very name has magic properties! May I place it here at the beginning so that in these pages there will be at least the one golden word?

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THE JOYOUS TROUBLE MAKER

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CHAPTER I

THE LAST OF THE HOUSE OF CORLISS

MEN never loitered about their work on Thunder River ranch, the "Queen's Ranch" as it has grown to be known latterly. Booth Stanton, the lean jawed, keen eyed manager of the local Corliss interests, saw to that; it was his business as it was his knack to get out of every man upon his pay rolls all of the efficiency that lay within him. But since last Monday when the message had come to him over the fifty-mile-long telephone wire connecting the ranch headquarters with the railroad town of White Rock, Booth Stanton had outdone himself. Now the activity under his watchful eyes was incessant, would have appeared feverish were it not so invariably prolific of the desired results. From the office in his cabin a hundred paces removed from the big ranch house, employing his desk telephone he kept in intimate touch with everything that went forward, snapping out curt commands in Booth Stanton's crisp way.

Quite like the enchanted palace in the wood the big mountain home that had so long drowsed behind drawn shades and shuttered windows awoke and bestirred itself. Curtains were whisked back, windows and doors flung wide in welcome to streaming sunlight and fresh spring air. The necessary house servants appeared as

though they had materialized from the message which had whizzed over telegraph and telephone wires announcing the return of the last of the Corliss blood, and having scarcely glanced about them, the old ones with curiosity, the new ones with startled eyes, plunged forthwith into an orgy of dusting and cleaning and setting in order. Wagons jolted merrily into White Rock to return creaking and groaning under high heaped piles of trunks and chests and boxes.

Not unlike an old castle the big house whose generous size and cost had won it the countrywide name of the Corliss Folly dominated Thunder River and Thunder River Valley from a position high up on the flank of Thunder Mountain. The approach was by means of a sinuous graded roadway, climbing gradually from the lower lands, a road into which had gone many thousands of the Corliss millions. Upon massive granite foundations rose massive walls, monster timbers with the bark and bits of green-grey moss still clinging to them upon the outer surfaces as it held on in the forests, the whole covering the small tableland save for the gravelled courtyard about which it was builded, a courtyard in which a man might wheel a running six-horse team. Just to the north of the house, set back from a cliff's edge and half hidden in a copse of young pines, was Stanton's cabin.

Getting in touch with the railroad office in White Rock, Stanton learned that the overland limited was on time. By way of thanks for the information he jammed the transmitter back upon its nickelled hook viciously, his eyes resting thoughtfully upon his clock.

"It's nip and tuck if Parker will be there with the car when the train pulls in," he mused. "If he is two seconds late . . . Well, it's Parker's job, not mine."

His telephone bell jingled. It was Bates, the road boss, saying that he was having trouble with bridge reconstruction across Little Thunder where, according to Bates, the spring washouts had played merry hell.

Booth Stanton cut him short.

"The train gets into White Rock in three quarters of an hour," he said coolly. "Parker's gone in to meet it and he'll burn up the roads on the way back. You know what that means, Bates. Oh, I don't want to hear your tale of woe; think all I've got to do is squat here and listen to a man cuss? Get busy."

In turn he called up the cattle foreman, the horse foreman, the superintendent of the new mine across the ridge some fifteen miles to the eastward, saying alike to each man of them:

"You'll report at the house office at one o'clock. Take a tip from me and come in early."

He went to his door and for a little stood looking out across the green valley stretched below, marking the roaming herds of cattle and horses, noting the men who rode among them or teamed along the winding road or appeared and disappeared as they went about their various duties, duties set them by Booth Stanton in the absence of the last of the Corliss blood who was returning today. Well, it was not unlike some petty kingdom, this Queen's Ranch, and he had ruled it like some petty king since the autumn of last year. His hard eyes brightened to the glorious expanse lying below

them, his blood ran pleasantly, tingeing his weathered cheek. He had hired men and fired men, he had helped to make men and break men, he had directed day after day whatever must be done across many miles of valley and mountain; he, himself, had been in numerous matters a court of last appeal.

But now he knew within his soul that his monthly wage, ample though it was, was less a thing to grip with jealous fingers than something else that had grown dear to him, vastly less desirable than the sense of power that had been his, undisputed. His lungs filled deeply to the sweet mountain air, the muscles at the bases of his jaw hardened, his eyes running whither the road ran toward Boulder Gap were speculative. Now he was to be no longer absolute but rather majesty's prime minister. For a Corliss was returning to assume responsibility, a Corliss whose hand was eager to grasp the reins of affairs, a Corliss whose imperious and arbitrary disposition Stanton knew and recognized as the dynastic inheritance of a long line of vigorous, forcible men and women.

Clear enough as were the reasons why the expected arrival would irritate the man, it was evident that he experienced no unmixed emotions. There was a quick eagerness in the glance which he turned toward the lower valley, there was a springing quality in his step this morning, a tone in his voice which bespoke pleasurable excitation of a sort. His dark face expressed little of what lay in his mind at any time, but today it was easier to read satisfaction than distaste in his eyes and at the corners of his mouth.

Critically he noted what had been done in the flower gardens, approved and passed on. With a foot upon the first of the broad granite steps leading to the main entrance he paused, calling to a man whom he had seen through an open window.

"Bradford, come here," he commanded.

Bradford, tall, thin, immaculate, soft footed, came promptly, just the vague hint of a bow in his greeting.

"Good morning, Mr. Stanton," he said in a toneless voice. "It is good to be back, sir."

Stanton looked at him curiously.

"You are lying, Bradford, and we both know it," he returned shortly. "You'd a deal rather be in New York or even San Francisco. . . . You have everything ready?"

The majordomo, while his arms hung at his sides, lifted two thin white hands, flexing the wrists so that his palms were for an instant horizontal. Stanton's quick eyes that missed so little caught the gesture. It was the Bradford way of expressing annoyance.

"Almost, sir," spoke the man evenly. "I should have arrived at least another day earlier, that is all. But much can be done in the two or three hours still remaining us. Would you like to step in and see what I have done?"

"Later, perhaps. I wouldn't count upon more than two hours and a half, Bradford."

"Thank you. I'm glad to know."

"What have you done with the newspaper men?"

Again Bradford's palms right-angled his pendant arms.

"In the west wing, sir. I have turned over to them the billiard room and the little rest room. Lunch will be served them there."

"Three of them, aren't there?"

"Four. Another came alone after the others. He's the keenest one of the crowd; what he writes up will be worth reading. There he is having his pipe now."

Stanton looked in the direction indicated by Bradford's eyes. From the west exposure of the rambling edifice a winding gravelled path snaked its way between borders of wild laurels, leading to a little rustic pavilion which took advantage of a level space at the top of a slight fall of cliff. Cement posts with heavy chains run through them guarded the outer edge of the tiny plateau, affording an atmosphere of safety which added cosiness to the natural charm of the place. Here, his back turned to the house, lounged the man whom Bradford termed the keenest one of the reporters.

He was a big young man smoking a big black pipe, slow meditative puffs bespeaking a serene enjoyment of the moment. Soft shirt, riding breeches and boots proclaimed the manner of his coming; the others had driven out in an automobile hired in White Rock. He was bareheaded and the sun picked out the hint of dull copper in his hair.

"Steele, his name is," Bradford said by way of rounding out his information. "William Steele. Don't know which paper, but have an idea it's the San Francisco *Chronicle*. If there's nothing more, Mr. Stanton, I'll hurry things along inside."

Booth Stanton nodded absently, his eyes still upon

William Steele's broad, loosely coated back. Bradford turned and went again into the house. -

"I'll bet publicity was invented in the first place by a Corliss," muttered Stanton. "And it's good business at that. But if these news makers had waited a day or two I'd have been just as well pleased."

A hearty peal of young laughter issuing from the billiard room drew his eyes thither. Three men, one of them hardly more than a boy, the others veteran news writers, came out upon the broad veranda. Seeing Stanton they came toward him, a little round ruddy man in the lead.

"You're Booth Stanton, aren't you?" he asked pleasantly.

Stanton nodded.

"What's the cause of all the excitement?" he asked. "You fellows land on the job as though a big, new story had broken. Why all the haste?"

The ruddy man put out his hand, laughing.

"I'm Tom Arnold. This is Mr. Enright. This, Mr. Dibley. All we know is that our various rags will run a good big story with pictures, and that we're glad of the vacation. Swell view from here, eh?"

"Steele . . . that fellow out there . . . isn't one of your crowd?"

A slightly puzzled look crept into Tom Arnold's eyes.

"No," he admitted. "He's not a local man, either. Funny guy. Asked him what sheet he was with and he told me the funniest story I've heard in a year. We've doped it up, though, that he's the New York

Sun man. High cost of living and all that sort of thing, you know, has stirred a tremendous interest in all kinds of rural production. If he is the *Sun* man he's out here doing a detail of all western ranching."

"What makes you think he's with the *Sun*?"

"I'm the gumshoe," grinned young Enright. "First, we'd heard they were sending out a man. Second, he had a *Sun* in his pocket and had been reading a report on California mining and timber lands."

"Come in, boys," said Stanton, dropping the subject abruptly. "I'm pretty busy this morning, but we'll round up Bradford and get something to drink. Oh, Steele," he called, "join us over a bottle?"

William Steele turned without removing the pipe-stem from between his strong white teeth which shone cleanly as he answered. Across the brief distance separating him from the four men there came with the look of his eyes a sense of ineffable and unruffled good humour. Be he whatever else time and circumstance might prove him, one had but to look into the merry eyes, note the humorous mouth, mark the vigorous carriage of head and shoulders to write him down a man who drank deep of the sheer joy of life.

"Nó, thanks." The deep toned voice in harmony with the bigness of his bulk was also in tune with the atmosphere he created, richly good-natured. "I'm drinking my fill of the cocktail of the morning. Mix those old cliffs yonder with the white of the river and the green of the valley, put in a dash of the pine in the air, sprinkle with blue sky and sunshine and . . . Say,

old man, it beats champagne to a frazzle. Thanks just the same."

Stanton shrugged and led the way inside. Steele turned again to the prospect about and below him, smoking slowly.

Having for fifteen minutes entertained the representatives of the press after the generously hospitable manner proverbial of the Corliss home, Stanton excused himself and left them to their own devices. City men, all of them, with a natural and bursting curiosity about ranch activities, it was their pleasure to spend two or three hours looking through their own eyes into those small portions of the big outfit which they could visit in so brief a time. With gentle saddle horses provided at Stanton's orders and a man to accompany them and answer questions, they rode down the winding road to the valley. Steele watched them go and again gave his attention to the wide panorama offered him.

He was still at his lookout, seated finally in a chair he had dragged forward so that he could rest his heels upon the chain strung through the concrete posts, when far down in the valley a big red automobile faced into view. Steele dropped his heels and sat forward. Through the crystal-clear air he saw how the recently sundried dust puffed up under the speeding wheels and was left behind, rising and spreading slowly, how the heavy car bumped and jolted to the ruts and chuck-holes in the road, how the driver bending over the wheel had his work cut out for him as he took bend after bend at full speed. In the tonneau behind him sat the

last of the Corliss blood, a heavy motor veil trailing behind her.

A merry twinkle came into Steele's eyes, his lips shaped themselves to a broadening grin.

"By all accounts," he confided in the pipe whose ashes he at last knocked out, "we have the honour of witnessing the return of the Young Queen!"

The red car sped up the valley, was lost to view behind a clump of poplars, reappeared seeming to have achieved ever greater momentum, swept about a turn in a manner to make the man who watched lift his brows, rumbled across a high arched bridge, and with motor drumming shot up the first stage of the graded roadway, again losing itself as a shoulder of the mountain intervened.

Steele rose to his feet expectantly. Booth Stanton had come out of his cabin and walked swiftly toward the courtyard. Bradford came out of the house and, his whole immaculate being breathing respectful and solicitous servitude, stood at the foot of the granite steps like a queen's musketeer. A bell tinkled somewhere in the house and after it came hurrying footsteps. Two men servants appeared and stood at stiff attention a half dozen paces from Bradford's black coated back. Another bell tinkled and still another.

"The Young Queen!" chuckled Steele.

The red car had appeared, rising to the level of the small tableland, spurted forward with level road under its spinning wheels, flashed into the open court, accomplished the semicircular half turn and stopped at the steps, avoiding a smash-up by half a dozen inches.

Stanton swept off his hat and flung open the tonneau door, his eyes lighting up. Bradford drew a step nearer and stopped, watchful for a sign. The two men servants were like statues ready to be galvanized into action. Steele, watching it all, gave unhidden signs of amused interest.

"Miss Corliss!" cried Booth Stanton warmly, his hand out to the veiled occupant of the car. "It's wonderful to have you back with us."

Steele interestedly awaited her return greetings. His lips twitched as she answered.

"I am always glad to get back."

Her voice was cool, confident and if not actually arrogant at least studiously aloof. She nodded to Stanton, disregarding his hand which, while Stanton flushed, did its duty at the car's door. She seemed to take no note of Bradford or the other servants. A neatly booted foot appeared under her blue travelling suit, she stepped down and ran up the granite blocks to the porch. Here she paused, putting up her hands to her veil.

"Parker was late at the train," she said in the same cool voice. "I can't tolerate that sort of thing you know, Stanton. You will fine him for negligence and if he objects get me another driver in his place."

Steele for the first time saw her face and forgot for the moment to look to Parker or Stanton for the effect of her words. He had heard much of the beauty of this last Corliss, but accepted such reports as he did many others concerning the Queen's Ranch, with a grain of salt. Now, as she was swallowed up by the big double

front doors, not only Stanton and Parker and the two men servants stared after her, but William Steele as well. Only Bradford kept his eyes straight ahead until she had gone when, with a gesture to his underling, he followed her into the house.

"Damn it," snapped Booth Stanton, swinging about upon the chauffeur. "What did you want to be late for? You've started things off in great shape."

"I wasn't late," growled Parker. "Not late enough to count. I got there before the train had finished putting off and taking on passengers."

"Report at my office in ten minutes," cut in Stanton briefly.

Parker drove off, skirting the house to come to the garage in the rear. Stanton, with a sharp glance directed toward the house that brought him only the vision of Bradford's discreet back, trudged off to his cabin. Steele, his lips pursed for a whistle which never reached even his own ears, remained where he was, his inner eye busy with the pictured memory of the face of Miss Corliss.

He had gone back to his chair, his heels hooked over the chain, when some ten minutes later Bradford came out to him.

"Miss Corliss is having lunch immediately, Mr. Steele," he said from his customarily respectful attitude. "She will be glad of your company."

"The devil you say!" cried Steele.

"And I am to show you to your room, sir. . . ."

"Room?" interrupted Steele, springing to his feet.

"My dear master of ceremonies, what am I to do with a room?"

"Should you care to prepare for luncheon, sir. . . ."

Steele laughed and clapped Bradford heartily upon the back.

"Just between you and me this is the only suit, including necktie, shirt, socks and boots, I've got in the world. I brushed my teeth after breakfast, combed my hair beforehand, washed my hands not over two or three hours ago. Lead on, kind sir; let us not delay this presentation to royalty."

Closely following the unresponsive Bradford, smiling broadly as he went as though enjoying some rare jest all by himself, he went to meet the mistress of the Corliss millions, the Young Queen of the Queen's Ranch.

CHAPTER II

BILL STEELE AND THE YOUNG QUEEN

“**Y**OU will forgive me, Mr. Steele,” said Miss Corliss graciously, “if I am forced to intermingle business with our luncheon?”

To William Steele, who had noted with some degree of interest the exquisite appointments of the big, high ceilinged rooms through which he had followed Bradford to the tiny luncheon room looking out upon a garden of artificially promoted wild flowers and shrubs, it had seemed that the house was fairly cluttered up with men servants and maid servants. Already it became evident to his long doubting mind that at least some of the tales told about the Queen's Ranch were based upon as solid foundations as the massive house itself. He now turned the battery of a somewhat amused curiosity upon Miss Corliss herself.

“If you will ask what questions you please while we eat,” she continued as they sat down, “I'll try to answer them. You see I have been in the East since last fall and the first days at home here are always busy days.”

So long had Steele reserved his initial remark to her that Miss Corliss looked up at him with quick question in her glance. She saw that his were very pleasant eyes, well set under good brows, that the mouth was almost, yet not quite, smiling. Had his expression been differ-

ent she might have thought that this big, loosely clad young fellow in soft shirt and boots was tongue tied temporarily through embarrassment growing from surroundings unaccustomed.

For his part, William Steele had business with her, a young woman of whom he had heard much, whom until today he had never seen, whom, until this moment, he had not had the opportunity to look upon closely. Before he so much as opened his lips he meant to have his own tentative opinion of his hostess, an opinion which took no stock of hearsay but relied upon what scant evidence was now his at first hand.

She was littler than he had expected, not a tall woman by any means. He was sure that her figure left nothing to be desired. If it had, he was cautiously aware, the soft, dark green gown into which she had changed since her ride, would have taken care of that matter. She knew how to dress; one point immediately and definitely established. That was something. A woman should know how to dress; it is a part of her business.

Her hands . . . and hands are to be overlooked no more than eyes or mouth . . . were what he had supposed he would find them. Very soft skinned, very pink-and-white. Like the lily, she toiled not with them nor did she spin. A second point.

Her eyes . . . he found them her chief charm, and sweepingly and without reserve he had acknowledged her unusual charm when she had lifted her hands to her veil . . . lay there. Just now, though they regarded him coolly, he saw that they should naturally be very lovely eyes, soft, expressive, a seductive god-

dess-grey which could haunt a man with their tenderness or coax him to share in their mirth. He fancied from that moment that there were distinctly two of Miss Corliss, the one God made her, the one she was making herself. Amplifying that impression he hazarded the opinion that God could do a better job here than could Miss Corliss. There was nothing like letting good-enough alone. Her eyes, to conclude with them before his attention travelled elsewhere, she was forcing to appear matter-of-fact, business-like . . . cool. The thermic adjective on which he had hit at the beginning was the proper one. In it perhaps lay the key to an understanding of that rivalry between the young woman herself and the powers which had made her what she had found herself. That contest was one over the matter of soul-temperature. Steele's opinion . . . still tentative of course and precarious . . . was that her destiny at the outset had been one of warmth and sunniness, and that of her own volition she was reconstructing herself into a being who would rather freeze a man than thaw him. He remembered Booth Stanton's obvious discomfiture and chuckled reminiscently.

Miss Corliss was lifting her brows at him. He hastily noted that she was very young though so poised, that her mouth was made to be kissed though she did not suspect the fact, and at last spoke.

"I have discovered," said William Steele pleasantly, "the suspicion of a dimple."

He had wondered if her brows could go still higher. Now he knew that they could. He knew, too, that she could freeze a man quite as he had foreseen that she

could. An ordinary man, that is, and fortunately now for his mental balance he was not an ordinary man. Over her head he caught an amazed stare from Bradford. Had this genial young man drawn a revolver from his pocket and levelled it at his hostess' head it is to be doubted if Bradford would have been more thunderstruck. Miss Corliss herself for the moment was speechless. Steele unfolded his napkin, selected his salad fork and smiled at her equably.

"Mr. Steele," said Miss Corliss icily, "I shall thank you if you will confine your remarks to what business lies between us."

"But, don't you see," cried Steele in vast, untroubled good humour, "that I have touched upon one of the most interesting points in the whole matter! Miss Corliss, last of her name, mistress of many millions, brain of her own big enterprises, heavy stockholder in a vast railroad system, queen of the Queen's Ranch, sole owner of the Little Giant gold mine, and-so-on for half a column, harbours a skeleton in her closet . . . and it is a dimple! Maybe two of them. That after all, though the public knows her only as a synonym of the power of wealth, she is just a thunderingly pretty girl! Big, soft grey eyes, red lips to tempt and trick and snare a man's soul . . ."

"Mr. Steele!"

She rose to her feet, her eyes no longer cool but suddenly blazing, the coolness gone out of her cheeks, too, to give place to the hot tide of swift anger.

"This is impertinence! Though you come as a stranger I have been willing to give you a few moments

from a busy day supposing that you were as anxious as I to get through the necessary business which brings you here. If you propose merely to be insufferable, to forget that we are not even acquaintances and will never be more than that, it would be best to end our conversation now."

The words came trippingly, heady with passion.

"Dear me," said Steele, still unruffled. "I had no idea it was a crime to tell a girl she was pretty. We'll brand it *lèse majesté*," and his broadening smile came back with the words. "I'll consider myself properly rebuked and we'll pass on to safer territory. You see, I'm no ladies' man at all, Miss Corliss. Shall we let it go at that and try a fresh beginning?"

She stood looking at him a bit doubtfully, frowning a little, not quite certain how to take him. Finally, the most sensible thing seeming to be to sit down again, she resumed her place.

"I'll be glad, as I told you, to answer any pertinent questions."

"Pertinent is good," laughed Steele. "Well, that's fair at that. No kidding goes, eh? Now we'll begin by getting your name straight. Trixie, isn't it? Trixie Corliss?"

"No," said Miss Corliss emphatically. "It is not. It is Beatrice Corliss."

"How old?" was the next question. Steele's head was a little to one side, he had the air of a man appraising the age of a horse he meant to buy.

"Is that necessary?" asked the girl coldly.

"Essential!" he cried warmly. "What I want is to

find the real *you* under the name, Beatrice Corliss; woman of affairs. I'd judge you at twenty-five."

"Twenty-one," said Miss Corliss aloofly. "Next November."

"Um," said Steele thoughtfully, though she was never sure that a grave expression did not mask a grin at her. "It takes big money interests to put in the fine lines, doesn't it? Next: How big a proposition have you at hand here?"

"Meaning just what, Mr. Steele?" she asked stiffly.

"The ranch. . . . By the way, it's called the Queen's Ranch, isn't it?"

"To answer your last question, yes."

"Just of late, I believe? It used to be known as Thunder River Ranch, didn't it?"

"Yes. To both questions."

"And it was to mark your coming that the name changed? Because of your . . . let me see; how shall I put it pertinently? . . . of your queenly appearance? Or queenly way of running things? Or both? Just why, Miss Corliss, please?"

The question was put with much grave innocence. Still she had the uneasy impression that he was making fun of her. She had known people to dislike her just as she had known people to fawn and curry favour; it had never entered her experience to have any one, least of all a man, make fun of her. Still she met his eyes steadily and without noticeable hesitation answered.

"I believe I have been called autocratic. It is my own ranch and I do what I please with it."

"I believe you," he agreed pleasantly. "Now the ranch; how many acres?"

"Something over thirty thousand, including mountain and timber lands. My manager, Booth Stanton, can give you such information as this. Even better than I."

"The land alone, then, is valued at close to half a million?"

"I value it at something over that."

"To the tax assessor or the press?"

"To the press," she said steadily, with no flicker of the smile he had fished for.

"Exclusive of the Little Giant mine?"

"Certainly."

"That is on a paying basis?"

"Stanton can give you the figures. It netted me last year something over twenty thousand."

"Whew!" commented Steele. "I wish I had a mine like that."

Here being no question she offered no remark. Bradford, ever watchful, gave a signal with one of his expressive thin hands and a servitor in livery appeared with the next course. For a moment conversation died as Steele ate and pondered. Then,

"You manage all of your own affairs?"

"Yes. I have, of course, capable men under me to take my orders and give expert attention to the various branches of my work. I don't pretend to know anything about mining operations, for instance."

"The queen acknowledges the limitations of humanity," he chuckled. "Well, let's get on. Next ques-

tion: You have lands along the upper waters of Thunder River? "

" Yes."

" Near the place that is called Hell's Goblet? "

" Yes."

" At what figure do you hold those lands? They're mostly rock and big timber, aren't they? "

" They are not for sale."

" The world's for sale! " he laughed carelessly. " If the price happens to be big enough. Would you take, say twenty dollars an acre for a section in there? That's big money, you know, for wild, rough land so far from anywhere."

" No. I wouldn't accept twenty dollars. Nor yet fifty. I'm not selling, Mr. Steele."

" Why? " he asked curiously.

" Because," she flared out, " I don't want to. And I fail to see the drift of your questions."

" That should be plain enough." Under this second signal of her hot displeasure he was as cheerful as though she were smiling upon him. " You told me to ask what questions I pleased and you would answer them. I have naturally taken advantage of a pleasant situation. From the point of the lands about Hell's Goblet I was going to another pertinent one."

" Let us have it," she said sharply.

" Are you engaged? " asked Steele. " Or even in love? "

Never until now had she met a man like this one. Plainly, for one of those rare occasions in her life, she was uncertain of just what to do or say. Finally,

speaking with a marked lack of expression she replied:

"I fail to see why the public should be interested in knowing about so intimate and purely personal a matter."

"Hang the public! I'm not the public. I'm just Bill Steele, and I want to know."

"Then, Mr. Bill Steele, may I answer that it is none of your business?"

"Sure thing. No harm done at all. Next . . ."

"Next," she interrupted before he could go on, "you will please confine your desire for information to such matters as your paper has instructed you to get."

Steele's laughter startled her, booming out suddenly. A look of sheer wonder came into her eyes; she began to think the man mad.

"Paper!" He choked over the word. "Why bless your soul, my dear girl, I'm no more a newspaper man than you are. 'Fess up, now; can't you remember having heard of Bill Steele? Knew your father for years Bill Steele, mining engineer, gentleman of adverse fortune, lord of an empty pocket and a full heart? Come now; think."

A dead silence fell in the little luncheon room after the merry burst of Steele's laughter. Beatrice Corliss looked at him with a sort of horrified expression of incredulity in her eyes. Her gasp and Bradford's, twin signals of consternation, had been lost in her guest's echoing enjoyment of the situation.

"Bradford told me," she said, her voice at last a trifle uncertain, "that you were representing the *New York Sun*."

"Bradford slipped up," cried Steele in hearty appreciation of the look he surprised just then in Bradford's eyes. "He simply guessed and guessed wrong."

Miss Corliss turned in her chair, her eyes upon Bradford. The major domo's face went a painful scarlet. For once in his life his two hands met in front of him, clasped and lifted in an attitude of prayer.

For the second time in so few moments the girl rose to her feet.

"You have done a very ungentlemanly thing . . ."

"Betrayed your trust, eh? Played spy and sailed under false colours?" laughed Steele. "Come now, Beatrice Corliss, be a good sport. I have only had my little joke and no harm done."

"Bradford," said Beatrice Corliss with crisp distinctness, "you may serve the remainder of my lunch in the breakfast room. And," the words reminding Steele of little separate bits of tinkling ice, "you may report to me in my office at one o'clock."

Her head lifted very high, with no further glance toward the table from which she turned, she left the room.

"Such a little Queen!" observed Steele dramatically.

Beatrice Corliss' cheeks as she went through the door which Bradford flung open for her were as red as Bradford's own.

CHAPTER III

CONCERNING HELL'S GOBLET AND TWO PROMISES

ESSENTIALLY an outdoors-man, William Steele's mental attitude toward the class of people whom he grouped and branded as the "soft-handed sort" was pleasantly tinged with amused toleration. Which was natural and, since he himself was no less human than another, to be forgiven him. It was not that he looked down upon these other fellow beings sneeringly or even with conscious condescension; rather was he prone to ridicule them mirthfully and without venom, realizing that they had their privilege as he had his of living life as it pleased them. In his many bouts with fortune there had been too frequent and undisguised defeats for him to nourish any overweening sense of his own superiority. He was just plain man, was Bill Steele, which means that a great deal of the boy lived on in him, joyously and perhaps impudently.

The blood of the outdoors-man, be he man of the plains, mountaineer or one who takes his chances with the sea, is likely to be ruffled by the calm gaze of authority. Too long has he recognized but the one majesty of the natural world, too long has he battled with hard hands at that, to accept any other. Dictatorial mandates irritate, anger or . . . as in Steele's case . . . amuse him. Kingly attitudes assumed by his own brother mortals are little enough to his liking.

"Here below there is no sovereign but Earth," sums up his unformulated doctrine of existence, "and against her I wage unceasing and rebellious warfare." So Steele, without asking himself the clear-cut reason, was prepared to laugh at the serene graciousness of Beatrice Corliss, a girl.

A chance situation had tempted him and it was not his jovial way to refuse such invitations. Had he been a different sort of man in this particular he would not have remained, as he put it, "lord of an empty pocket and a full heart." Without premeditation he promptly acted the part of William Steele as the blood of his ancestors and his own life had made him. That his lot had been to incur the blazing anger of Miss Corliss brought him no visible regrets.

"It's good for her soul," was his cheerful way of thinking. "She'd be a corking fine girl if she wasn't so damned queenish."

He finished his meal alone and with hearty appreciation, conscious now and then of a horrified stare from the passing Bradford, filled his pipe and strolled outside. That he did not go by the billiard room for the hat he had left there bespoke his decision not to accept just yet his unwilling hostess' emphatic desire for his departure. He went back to his chair, rested his heels as before upon the chain strung between the concrete posts and with contented eyes gave his attention to the valley lands spread out below him.

Meantime Beatrice Corliss, having given Bradford his opportunity for an explanation which failed somewhat to placate her, sought to shut out of her mind

all thought of William Steele and his "boorish rudeness." In the first grip of her anger, before she had had time for the nicer selection of a word, she termed him to herself as just "fresh." It had not been her lot before to meet a man like him, a man who in his first talk with her should manifest toward her a degree of unpleasant familiarity so marked and so "insufferable." The adventure left no memories she cared to treasure. And yet, through its very novelty, the episode maintained a stubborn place in her thought. Seeking to plan in her former cool, untroubled, clear way for her interviews with her foremen, she found herself asking of a kind fate the joy of someday having in her two hands the opportunity of meting out to Mr. William Steele the punishment he so plainly merited.

She heard Steele go out and a few minutes later, having pushed her dessert aside, she went through the house to the front veranda. Here, set out in the cheer of the sun, was her chair whence, upon occasion, she could look across certain miles of her possessions and dream the dreams which pleased her. Today, however, she did not even seat herself; out yonder, his broad back turned upon her like a further rudeness, was Steele. She whirled and returned to the living room, resurgent annoyance reddening her cheeks.

"Bradford," she instructed her head servant coolly, "Mr. Steele is waiting outside. You will take him his hat and anything else he may have left here. You will tell him that he is free to go as soon as he chooses. If he fails to understand you may add that if he makes it necessary I shall have him put off the ranch."

Bradford bowed and departed, a look of eagerness in his eye, a new elasticity in his walk. Beatrice, without paying Mr. Steele the compliment of watching while he received his hat and her ultimatum, went to her office. Here, in an atmosphere of austere dignity created by massive furniture, her high-heeled slippers falling soundlessly upon the thick carpet, she walked restlessly back and forth, again seeking to gather her thoughts. She was to talk with Hurley of the Little Giant mine, with Brown, her cattle foreman, with Emmet Trent, her horse foreman, all due within a few moments. Further, she was to be in readiness for the coming of a dozen guests sometime during the afternoon. Bradford had assured her that everything was in readiness, or would be before her friends arrived, but . . .

Through the still air came William Steele's answer to her emissary, a joyous roar of laughter. And soon thereafter appeared Bradford himself, the look of eagerness in his eye having given place to one of uncertainty.

"Well?" asked Miss Corliss sharply.

"I gave him his hat, Miss Corliss," said Bradford. "And he . . . he said . . ."

"Well?" she repeated quickly. "Go on."

"He said, 'Thanks, old man.'"

Bradford, a man not easily upset, blurted the words out as though to get his mouth clean of them with all possible dispatch.

Beatrice Corliss was guilty of the suspicion of a sniff.

"You should have resented the familiarity, Bradford," she said briefly. "You gave him my message?"

"Yes, Miss Corliss. And he . . . perhaps you heard him? . . . he just laughed."

The eyes of a thwarted Corliss were not pleasant to look into.

"He said nothing?"

"I repeated your words. To make certain he had understood. Then he said . . ."

"Well?" cried the girl impatiently.

"He said," stammered Bradford, "'Go chase yourself, old party. I'm no rattlesnake. Besides, I want a talk with . . . with . . .'"

Bradford mired down, floundered, grew silent. But, in a moment under the compelling eyes of his mistress he continued hurriedly, tone and manner alike apologetic:

"With Trixie before he went! He called you . . . *Trixie!*"

The frown upon the girl's brows was one now of sheer perplexity. She dismissed Bradford with a gesture, suddenly aware that the situation was rapidly becoming absurd . . . ridiculous. Steele's crime was not one which would warrant his being bundled off, under armed escort, to jail. To put a man off of a thirty-thousand-acre ranch has its difficulties, especially when that man is of the William Steele type; it is quite another matter than having one's servants thrust him down the front steps into a city street and lock the door against his return. She *could* send for Booth Stanton, she *could* have a couple of cowboys take Steele into their custody and ride with him to her boundary line, half a dozen miles across the mountains.

Perhaps she would do it. For the moment but one thought restrained her: what she could not do was guard against his return. For, under the sunny good nature in the man she had sensed a stubbornness of determination which she suspected was as indomitable as her own. As matters were she was impressed with the wisdom and efficacy of simply ignoring him for the present.

The mine superintendent and the two stock foremen . . . she had them all come in together . . . had a very bad half hour of it. She dismissed them abruptly at last with a final admonition to report here again ten days later, with a blunt warning to Brown that he would be given just those ten days to show cause why he should not be discharged. The next hour she spent with Booth Stanton, touching upon a score of ranch matters. Stanton's tanned cheeks were flushed dully when he went out, his head held stiffly.

Miss Corliss, with Bradford at her heels, going through the many rooms of the big house upon a tour of inspection, found fault wherever possible because of the mood upon her. Then she went to her own bed room, dismissed her maid and sat down at her window, looking out at the rugged slope of Thunder Mountain where it rose into broken cliffs.

"I'll get you, Mr. William Steele," she said quietly. "And I'll get you right!"

They were the words of her father, Ben Corliss, money maker. She had heard him use them more than once, just as she was using them now, his voice dispassionate and hard. Ben Corliss had bequeathed to

his daughter much besides a fortune in gold, stocks, bonds and lands. He had given her himself as an object lesson, he had passed into her hands the keen ability to hold the great investments of his millions in an integral bundle destined to swell and increase because of its potential force and her acumen. His present to her upon her sixteenth birthday was ten thousand dollars in mining shares. With it went a few words of advice to which she hearkened and which she assimilated because she was Ben Corliss' daughter. His ways, being eminently successful, became her ways, his methods her methods. For nearly four years before his death Ben Corliss had trained her as he would have trained a son and on his death bed he told her simply: "You have got it in you to be a bigger figure in the financial world than I could ever be. It's born in you, Beatrice, bred in the bone."

He and Beatrice's mother had learned to be autocratic; Beatrice was born to autocracy. They had learned the power of wealth; she knew it instinctively. They were clear thoughted, capable parents; she was the expression of their union. She loved them sincerely; perhaps she respected and admired them more. Where they had led she followed, blazing new trails here and there.

As Corliss had dealt with men, so did Beatrice deal with them. If a man defied Ben Corliss, why then, soon or late, Ben Corliss "got him and got him right." He could afford to bide his time. So could Ben Corliss' daughter.

She rang for her maid. Her cheeks were cool now, her eyes on the verge of a smile.

"Tell Bradford to inform Mr. Steele that I shall be glad to talk with him in the office," she said. "That is, of course, if he still cares to speak with me."

The maid departed with customary speed, noting and wondering at the change a few moments had worked in her mistress. Beatrice, her eyes at last unmistakably smiling, her lips curving for the first time in some hours to lines which were not scorn's, rose and went to her glass. Her hands she lifted swiftly to her hair, fluffing it a little, winding a bronze curl about a forefinger. She was still smiling when, in answer to her maid's assurance that Mr. Steele had been shown to her office, she left her room.

She kept him waiting a moment, not too long so as to hint at premeditated intention but merely a sufficient time to suggest that she would come as soon as she finished some trifling matter which detained her. He looked at her curiously as she came in. She saw the expression which leaped into his eyes . . . he did not seek to hide it . . . and paid him back for it with a quick smile.

"There were two dimples," said Steele, nodding approval. "I thought so."

She had planned to remain standing during a brief interview. But he had come a step closer and his great bulk towering above her gave her a certain troublesome feeling of helplessness which she knew would not do at all. So, swiftly changing her campaign like any

capable general, she moved to her chair at the long table.

"Yes," she answered lightly. "But the poor little things don't get much of an opportunity to show themselves these busy days. Now, Mr. Steele, though every one knows that a girl would rather talk about her own irresistible charms than speak of anything else in the world, I very much regret that I have but a few minutes I can give you. I have some guests coming this afternoon and you know what that means."

He moved around the table so as to stand on the far side of it facing her. Again she noted the bigness of him, sensing the power that lay in the wide shoulders. Taking swift stock of him just as Ben Corliss had ever taken stock of a man in his path, she judged that in Bill Steele there was besides a large happiness a certain dynamic forcefulness of character which it might chance to be as well not to overlook.

Steele had been regarding her intently; she marked in him that little trick of holding his words until he had sought to look at what lay back of one's eyes.

"You are Ben Corliss' girl, up and down," he said abruptly. "Only I wonder if there got squeezed out of your ego something which made him the fine chap he was? Or," he added thoughtfully, "if the spark in poor old Ben burnt out before you knew him?"

"I don't quite understand you, Mr. Steele," she said quietly.

How could she? Here was Bill Steele, a confessed penniless gentleman of misfortune, speaking of her father as "poor old Ben"!

"He had a soul when I knew him," said Steele simply. "But that was before he got both hands full of money."

"I believe," said Beatrice, "that you will find other voices than your own lifted in decrying money and money making; I believe, also, that you will find that the owners of the voices are either miserable failures or are still putting in their spare time grabbing for what nickels they can get."

Steele laughed.

"Money's all right," he answered. "Why, I am always chasing the rolling discs and find it one of the best sports a man can devise. Only it doesn't happen to be the whole game. I just made a goodly pile down in Mexico myself, tried to double it speculating, slipped up and went broke, and now what am I doing? Why, trying for another pile! Great little game, Trixie, great little game! But, Lord! there's another thing or two!"

It seemed to her that that "Trixie" just slipped out without intention and without Steele's consciousness of it. She wished that she knew. She decided quickly not to notice it.

"You made your money mining, I suppose?" she offered.

"Sure thing. That's the only right way . . . go find it and take it. I'd done it before; I'll do it again. But the trouble is," and a cheery grin accompanied the words, "I always go busted again."

"Speculating?"

"Who's playing at representing the press now?" he challenged brightly. "Sure; bucking the other

man's game. You juggle with stocks, don't you? Yes, and get richer all the time. I monkey with them and go back to work. Moral: having got my fingers burnt two or three times I now know enough to keep them out of the fire. Next wad I keep."

"It is some mining matter which brings you up into these mountains?"

"First thing," he said, frankly dodging her direct question, "I'm up here to have a good time. I'm off into the woods for a spell to eat my own cooking over my own fire, to sleep under the stars, to rampse around with plenty of elbow room and nobody to listen if I want to turn loose my voice and sing. I'm taking a vacation. Next thing, I want to grab some land and build me a cabin. After that . . . we'll see what we see."

What Beatrice Corliss saw and saw clearly was that he was a man who could keep his own counsel if it pleased him. If he had some knowledge or dream of gold hereabouts he would keep the matter to himself until he saw fit to divulge it. She waited for him to go on.

"When I asked you about your acreage in the vicinity of Hell's Goblet," he resumed, "I was talking business. I've been in that country. I know it rather well. I want it. I'll take a section off your hands there for twenty dollars the acre. Are you on?"

"I think I am," she smiled back at him. "Decidedly on, as you put it." She scribbled a note upon a pad in front of her. "I'll have Hurley send some men over to prospect that country again. Thank you."

"They've combed it many a time," said Steele,

evenly. "That land is lying idle now; you don't even run stock on it to make it worth your while. There's big timber in there, but it's hard to get out. I want it. What's the word? Twelve thousand eight hundred dollars, spot cash, for the section about Hell's Goblet."

She noted in his eyes an expression to which she had no key. For answer she returned him a cool look while she thought. He was offering twice the price which such land would bring on the open market. She was not asking herself why; rather, what she sought to imagine was just *where* in that square mile of rugged land the gold lay.

"As I told you before," she said after a little pause, "the land is not for sale."

"That means that my bid isn't high enough. What do you want for it?"

"It is not for sale."

"Ben Corliss' girl up and down," chuckled Steele. "Well, well, we won't fight over it. But you see I mean to have that section, and I wanted your good will to go with it. Oh, I like a good scrap as much as the next fellow, but I don't hanker after bad blood between neighbours. Come ahead, be a sport; you don't need that land, you've got land enough, money enough without it. You'd never miss it. Better give in gracefully. I'm going to have it, anyway, you know."

In spite of her determination to appear unruffled this man angered her more than any other man she had ever known. Having given over making fun of her he now had the assurance to inform her coolly that in spite

of her he meant to have a square mile of her mountain lands! Obviously he was talking sheer nonsense. And yet his manner, rather than an absurd statement, for the second time that day drove a hot flush up into her cheeks. It is one thing to guard one's temper, another to hold it securely in check in the face of such provocation.

"Do you expect me to continue to listen to such ridiculous talk, Mr. Steele?" she asked sharply.

"It's not ridiculous by a jug full," he told her, his eyes twinkling. "Remember that after all you're just a little girl who doesn't know all of the simple facts of the universe. Oh, you're as sharp as tacks, I'll admit, but you're bright and new and haven't explored all of the dark corners. Now listen a minute and I'll be clearing out: I'm going to have that little chunk of land with all the water, dirt, rocks, trees and brush that go with it. And I want you to know at the jump that I wouldn't take it if you needed it. You're rich without it, got more millions right now than I have thousands. If you were down on the rocks I wouldn't take a penny off you. But your queenly affluence make this a different proposition."

"Once and for all I'm not going to sell. And," her eyes growing as hard as Corliss eyes could grow as she sprang to her feet, "I'd sell to any man in the world for ten cents an acre rather than to you at twenty dollars! I think that this ends our talk, Mr. Steele?"

"I liked you better while the queen was away," said Steele. "You *have* got the makings of a first class girl in you . . . if you ever wake up to it. Say, I'm

going to get my cabin started within a week or so. That's a promise. Suppose you ride out to see me and spend an afternoon? I'll show you how to do a lot of things you don't know beans about; how to make a fire, how to cook over it, how to take a trout, how to live, by thunder! It's lots of fun living . . . just living!"

"When you get a cabin builded on the Goblet section," said Miss Corliss, looking him steadily in the eye, "I'll come and spend an afternoon cooking for you. That is another promise! In the meantime I am giving strict orders that trespassers on my land will receive all of the attention which they have a right to expect at the hands of the law."

"Good!" cried Steele. "I'll be going now. And, remember, I'll look for you within three or four weeks. I'll rush work on the cabin. And, say: make them quit calling you the Queen. That sort of stuff cheapens you. You're too nice a girl to stand for a baby make-believe game like that. Show the bunch that, even if you haven't got the most amiable disposition in the world and even if you're not as pretty as some others, there's something to you besides your dad's money. Come out of the ice box and use your dimples a little. . . . You just keep in touch with me and I'll make life worth while for you."

"You are very kind, Mr. Steele," said the girl, her pulses hammering, her voice low in her throat with the constraint she put upon herself.

"Not at all," laughed Steele. "Only you see I'm not in love with you, I'm not planning to fall for your quaint charm, I'm not trying to curry favour for any

reason in the world. So I can talk to you straight out! It's good for your soul to have a man like me around. Good-bye, Neighbour."

She did not move as she watched Bill Steele, the most maddening of men she had ever met, go out. As he strode down the veranda he was humming and snatches of the little song, the most maddening of songs, came back to her in his rich untrained voice; it was *La Donna e mobile*.

"Ugh!" said Beatrice Corliss. "The brute!"

CHAPTER IV

INTO THE WILDERNESS

BEATRICE CORLISS, when Steele had gone down the mountain roadway to the stable for his horse, turned back to her office table. The man's word of what he meant to do was of course, like the man himself, absurd. A big block of land was not to be stolen as though it were a pocket handkerchief. Still her eyes were frowning. His air of cheerful certainty was disquieting despite her conviction that he could do nothing. His voice had rung with a seemingly outspoken sincerity which troubled and puzzled her.

For perhaps fifteen minutes she sat before her table motionless, seeking to explain to herself the purpose of Steele's empty vaunt. If his own account of himself were truthful and he was a mining engineer and before now had prospected through the Hell's Goblet country, then it was more than merely probable that he had found gold there. The Little Giant mine, now running full blast and profitably, was only a half dozen miles from the Goblet across the ridge. It would not be surprising if Steele had stumbled upon a strike. This would explain his desire for the land.

But it fell short of the explanation she sought. Steele's positive statement that he meant to have the land in question willy-nilly, with her good will if that were forthcoming, without it if need be, was quite an-

other matter. It might be just his misshapen idea of a further "joke." Was he seeking, as he would have expressed it, "to throw a scare into her, also for the good of her soul"? Or did he mean what he said and did he know what he was talking about?

When, still puzzling over the matter, she went again to her outer door she saw Steele down in the valley riding a bay, white stockinged horse toward the upper end of the valley. That way lay the Little Giant and the new mining town of Camp Corliss beyond . . . that way, also, lay the Goblet country.

With sudden inspiration the girl turned back into her office, took from its case in her table drawer a pair of field glasses, and with them in her hand hastened through the house, coming out at the back into a little flower garden just under a line of low granite cliffs. She hurried through the flowers, came to a steep path cut long ago into the rocky wall and mounting swiftly mounted after a breathless moment to the old lookout. Here, at the top of the slight precipice, was a level space some twenty paces across where were benches and a rustic table under an open pavilion like that in front of which Steele had sat earlier in the day. From here one might have a fuller, wider sweep of valley land and broken mountain. What was more to the present purpose, from here the girl could pick up with her glasses the spote where the Goblet trail branched off to the right from the Little Giant road.

Steele had disappeared, but in a moment rode again into view passing beyond a grove of river poplars. She focussed her glasses upon him. Before she marked

anything else she noted how he rode. It was as her own outdoors men rode, with a seat which, while it seemed loosely careless, was both sure and confident. His horse was in high spirit, dancing out of the way of a wind blown leaf, snorting its distrust of a bobbing rabbit, ready in a flash to whirl and plunge to this side or that. And yet, ever across the lengthening distance intervening, it was patent that a firm hand on the reins was amply competent to cope with the caprice of a half broken four-year-old, while the big body in the saddle moved in unison with the animal as though the two were co-ordinating parts of one organism.

He had not yet reached the parting of the ways. Now she took stock of what things he carried with him. Under his knee, in its case, was a gun, rifle probably. She fancied that strapped to it was a second case containing the sections of a fishing rod. Behind his saddle, done up in a compact bundle, was a roll of blankets; from the moment she saw them she was certain that he would turn off at the trail.

He was lost to her as he rode down closer to the river, hidden by the fringe of trees. She would not be able to see him again until he had traversed another five hundred yards. Her brows contracted with her impatience; his careless leisureliness irritated her quite as though he had known she was watching him and in order to anger her had refused to hasten.

She turned from him, looking toward the lower valley. She did not require her glasses to see an automobile approaching from the direction of White Rock. Her guests were coming already.

With increased impatience she turned again toward Steele. She must be at the house to meet her friends and the man was so annoyingly slow.

But at length he appeared again, galloping now.

"That's the first decent thing you've done today, Bill Steele," she murmured. "Hurry, will you?"

Steele hurried on. At a swinging gallop he passed along the winding road, hidden to her now and then by a tree or a shoulder of the ridge, riding into view again in a moment, the bulk of him growing smaller with the distance. At last he had come to the foot of the trail which passed to the right and into the southern half of the ranch. The girl watched breathlessly. Steele swerved his horse into the trail.

"He is going straight to Hell's Goblet!" she said sharply. "Whatever his game is, that man means business!"

And so did the young queen of Thunder River ranch. She waited no longer to watch him, gave but a speeding glance to the two automobiles now in full view in the valley. Running down the steep rocky pathway, she hastened to her office and her table telephone.

She rang three bells, a call for Ed Hurley at the Little Giant and, while waiting for his voice, set her finger to the bell set in her table. To Bradford, who came immediately, she said briefly:

"I want Booth Stanton. Just as quick as he can get here."

Hurley was in his little office, having barely returned from his talk with her. She gave him his orders without wasting words or time:

"Send a couple of your best men immediately into the Goblet country," she said coolly. "Your best men, understand? They are to remain there until further orders. Their chief duty is to see that no trespassers come onto the land; in particular if they find a man there who calls himself William Steele, they are to see that he gets off of my property and stays off. Further, they are to prospect every inch of that section for gold; there's gold there."

Leaving Hurley without any further information, she clicked up the transmitter, waited a second, then rang White Rock and asked for the telegraph office.

"This is Miss Corliss of the Queen's Ranch," she said in answer to the operator's "Hello." "Take a message, please. To Attorney Stuart Rollins, Merchants' Exchange, San Francisco. Look immediately into ranch title. Especially extreme southeast section. Is anything wrong? Signed, Beatrice Corliss."

The first of the two touring cars was already upon the lower grade. She glanced swiftly at the clock upon the opposite wall. Then Stanton, walking quickly, came in at her door.

"What do you know of William Steele?" she demanded.

"The reporter?" asked Stanton.

"He is not a reporter," she retorted. "Who said that he was? Did he tell you so?"

"No. Bradford —"

"It seems," she interrupted icily, "that all the men I have about me are fools! That man Steele is a mining engineer, and he is here because he is after gold."

Do you know anything about a miner named Steele?"

"Yes," said Stanton stiffly. "A good deal by hearsay. I have never seen him, though."

"You saw him today. I haven't time now for a lot of hearsay. What sort of man is he, do you know that?"

"Not first hand. His reputation is that of a square sort of chap."

Beatrice sniffed.

"I'm scarcely interested in his morals. Does he amount to anything out among men? Is he just a loud talker or does he mean what he says? Has he ever *done* anything?"

"He's done some rather big things, I believe. He hasn't the name of being a wind bag, if that is what you mean. Ed Hurley knows him; Hurley has mentioned him to me. Ed thinks he is a big man in his way."

"In the way of a boor!" cut in Beatrice. "That is all, Stanton. I'll get further information from Hurley when I have time for it. I have just instructed him to see that William Steele refrains from trespassing on my property. You will co-operate with him in the matter."

Then, as the first car rolled into the open court Beatrice drove the puzzled look from her eyes, summoned an expression of welcoming gaiety which was not entirely spontaneous, and hurried out.

Three young women in motor veils and two men in goggles greeted her, the women effusively and with skillfully hidden envy, the men warmly and with admiration

in their eyes. While the car rolled away these stood in the courtyard awaiting the coming of the second automobile. One of the men, a keen eyed, massive jawed man of forty with a touch of grey at the temples and an air of quiet, confident mastery, whose manner bespoke his habitual experience of getting what he wanted, grasped a moment of much chattering to say quietly to Beatrice:

"I heard in White Rock that a man named Steele, William Steele, had ridden out this way. Not a friend of yours, is he?"

Quickly she lifted interested eyes to his.

"No. I have just met him today. Do you know him then, Mr. Embry?"

"I know something of him," said Embry as quietly as before. "Rather a good deal. Is he still here?"

"No. Tell me, what sort of a man is he?"

"Not just the kind I'd like to see hanging around you," was Embry's rejoinder. "He's a crook, Miss Corliss; look out for him."

Then the others came and Joe Embry turned with his hostess toward them.

So William Steele was just plain crook, then? Joe Embry had said so, and Joe Embry was a man in whose opinions Beatrice Corliss placed more faith than in most men's. A boor first, a crook next. And she had let him lunch with her, he had had the assurance to behave toward her as he might have acted with a shop girl!

Could Steele have read her thoughts he must have

been surprised that, while greeting her guests, she could give him so great a place in them. But William Steele, having pondered upon her more than he realized since leaving the ranch house, had now other matters to occupy him. In the first place this trail turning off into the mouth of the cañon was one little travelled and none too well remembered by him. Not for full five years had he ridden it, it was crossed and recrossed by numerous stock trails, the simplest matter in the world being for a man to lose it and after an hour's mistaken travel find himself at the end of a blind path in some tangle of brush. Unless he meant to be the entire afternoon in coming to the spot where he had planned to camp he must keep his wits about him.

"Five years," he mused, even while his eyes, running far ahead, picked up the monument of a flat stone upon a trailside rock marking the way for him, "and it's as safe as if it were tucked away in the United States treasury! I guess, old man, you wouldn't have plunged quite so recklessly if you hadn't had this to come back to. Lord, won't little Trixie throw a fit!"

The thought seemed to tickle his own sort of a sense of humour, for he chuckled his amused satisfaction with the probable approaching condition of affairs. But when he had reached the rock sign-post his eyes were merely keen and watchful again. A herd of young steers just ahead of him had trampled out all sign of path in a little grassy meadow and he was uncertain. Somewhere hereabouts the trail left the bed of the cañon, climbing steeply to mount and cross the ridge, making the short cut to the Goblet. To be sure it was no

great matter if he for a little lost his way; inevitably he must come to the particular spot he had set his mind upon since he had his general directions. But to a man like Steele, who knew more of the mountains than of city streets, it was a deeply pleasant sensation to find that, even after five years, he could follow on old, once travelled trail.

He reined in his horse, eased himself sideways in the saddle and sat for a little, sending his questing regard this way and that along the rugged, timbered slopes. The trees were big here about him, pine and fir and an occasional cedar, rising upon splendid, tapering boles a hundred, a hundred and fifty feet against the blue sky, filling the cañon with a pleasant duskiness. In the open spaces between the thick trunks the lush grass was dotted with the spring's blue and yellow flowers, threaded with thin streams, trampled by browsing cattle. Stamped cleanly and freshly at the edge of a sand-bedded rivulet where no cattle tracks had obliterated it was the hoof print of a big buck. Steele's eyes brightened. From far off on the mountainside he heard the liquid call of a quail.

"And we build ourselves thick walled houses to shut all of this out!" he muttered. "God, it's good to be back! Bill Steele, listen to me: this time you're going to stay put."

He had quite forgotten to seek his trail. But now, the memory of the bigger, vaster, more solitary woods of the Goblet country upon him, their murmurous voices calling to him across the five years of absence, he again sought the way that led to them. He swerved

to the right, crossed the floor of the cañon, reined in again at the foot of the slope where were fewer big trees, wider spaces between where mountain brush and boulders allowed the vision wider range. Again the light of satisfaction came into his eyes. Yonder, a short distance ahead and higher up, was a landmark to be remembered, two giant cedars standing straight and close together, a long splinter of granite wedged in between them and gripped securely for many long years to come, lifted twenty feet above the ground.

"Hello, old boys," laughed Steele. "I remember you, all right. No, I'm not going to stop to answer your riddle today, but I'm just as much obliged to you."

For the Goblet trail ran close to their trunks and from this point on there need be no hesitation. Steele swung down from the saddle. Leading his horse over the uneven ground, climbing in as straight a line as slope and brush would permit, he came in ten minutes to the cedars and their imprisoned rock. A moment he laid a big hand against a massive bole, looking up into the gnarled branches quite as one might turn glad eyes upon the weathered visage of an old friend. Then again he mounted, riding toward the south, keeping well up on the mountainside.

Half an hour later he passed over the ridge and dropped down into a country which had grown abruptly wilder, more rugged, infinitely eloquent of solitude. Beyond and below stretched away the big timber which man had left in its own dark browed dignity because its stronghold stood behind bulwarks of

mountains which had defied the making of roads. As he rode down to the rim of the thickening forest the whispering of its countless million singing tongues set the strings vibrating in his own heart. Only the crooning of the tree tops, the music of distant water splashing on glistening rocks, the breaking of dead sticks under the shod hoofs of the horse of him who entered the peaceful kingdom, and Steele filled his lungs and felt his blood stir pleasantly.

At last the boom of Thunder River was again in his ears and he was near his journey's end. This ridge, down which he rode slowly, was a long spur about which the river whirled in a six-mile-long horseshoe; he, in crossing it, was taking that short cut which lay between its source and the valley lands below the Corliss home. And yet, with at last the flash of turbulent water in his eyes, there lay the final three miles of broken lands before he came to his camp site at the Goblet. But already he counted the matter accomplished. The way, though uneven, was not to be mistaken. He had but to ride down to the river and turn upward along its course, keeping to the right bank when once he had forded it. In an hour or an hour and a quarter he would be unsaddling, then screwing the sections of his rod together as the first step toward supper.

Supper alone in the big timber! The prospect set him whistling like any boy off for a holiday. Potatoes from his scanty larder, jostling with onions and dried fruit deep within his roll of blankets, to be covered with coals and hot ashes at the rim of his fire, trout to sizzle and sputter and grow brown before exacting eyes, oof-

fee to bubble and send forth its tempting aroma from a treasured, spoutless and very black coffee pot. And the coffee pot itself? It awaited him at Hell's Goblet!

"For I'll bet a man the shirt off my back," was Steele's contented thought, "that the stuff I cached there five years ago hasn't so much as come under the prying eyes of a chipmunk. By the Lord, I'm getting home!"

Bigger and bigger, ever taller and more darkly august grew the trees as he rode on down into the narrow valley, duskier the woodland gloom, sweeter the spring air sprinkled with woodsy incense. When an unseen deer went crashing through the brush and struck out, splashing mightily, through the river just beyond a thick clump of red willows, Steele nodded his head in acceptance of a sound he could have expected and looked forward to with an agreeable sense of the fitness of things. Only some eight or nine miles from the Corliss ranch house, little more than half that distance from the Little Giant where men sweated and thundered the silences with blasts of dynamite and black powder, here was the wilderness in untroubled supremacy. It seemed to him that here the forestland possessed a conscious entity, a sentient personality that it breathed as he himself breathed, taking its bright joy from the sense of living, that its mighty breath touched his hair and enfolded him in an ineffable caress.

"It's because I'm ripe for it," thought Steele.

He rode swiftly along the grass-grown trail where speed was possible, slowly when must be, eager now to come to his camp site before the true dusk of day's end

merged with that which broods always over the forest. At a well remembered ford he pushed his horse across the stream, knowing that further up there could be no crossing because of steep, water gouged rocky banks. In a little meadow where a tributary stream and thick rich grass promised the best of pasturage he unsaddled, tethering his horse with a twenty-foot rope. The saddle with its pack thrown over his shoulder, he hastened on upstream on foot.

Now he clambered over piled and strewn boulders, always climbing steeply. The din of the water swelled into a thunderous roar as it flashed out and down in a series of white waterfalls. But impatiently he pushed on, breathing deeply, spurred by the knowledge that in ten minutes he could throw down his saddle and call the day's work done.

In that ten minutes he penetrated the very citadel of solitude. Between great boulders ten, fifteen feet high, over fallen slabs of granite, under occasional monster pines, at last along a little-used deer trail leading back from the river and to a small, grassy, timbered tableland. Upon a sun-dried mat of fallen pine needles he dropped his saddle, and with a deep sigh of utter content turned toward the west. Yonder, still an hour high above the wooded ridge, was the sun. There, catching only infrequently the sun's slant rays, lay the source of Thunder River. And here, to be seen at its best from where he stood, only a hundred yards from him, was Hell's Goblet.

Those who come first into such spots are not men who carry subtle fancies in their brains or golden similes

or the tenderer poetical growths. Rude men, roughed by the frontiers, they father a rude nomenclature. Devil's Slide, Fool's Peak, Shirt Tail Cañon, Yankee Jim's, Hang Town, such are the names which sprinkle the western mountain country, names given out of hand which cling on as a memory of an earlier day. Hell's Goblet might have been christened otherwise and more gently, perhaps more befittingly, but it never was.

It was a great granite bowl measuring some twenty-five or thirty feet across filled with eddy-churned, white, angry water, fed from a full stream which plunged down into it from the rocks above, which whipped at the troubled surface night and day, which had lashed the restless waters into white froth and flying spray throughout the ages. And as the stream hurled itself into the monster cup in a frenzied orgy of liquid flashing and thunderous sound, so did it pour itself out over the worn rim, to fall echoing into the pools below. If in the wide woods through which Steele had ridden there held the calm and peace of the solitude, then here was that other expression of the wilderness, the passionate heart of the wild itself.

"And here," mused Steele, his hat off, the cañon air stirring his hair, in his eyes the sombre tints of the forest, the glint of tumbling water, the cloudless blue of the sky, "do I begin my holiday. Thank God I went broke as soon as I did! Old goblet, fuss and fume and sputter and boil over all you please; you are mine now! Tonight you'll sing me to sleep, tonight we'll light up the stars for our candles while we use the world for a pillow! A royal welcome for your liege

lord, old fellow, Bill Steele, King of the Universe! What have we to do with petty Queens?"

As though in answer to him there came, faint in his ears through the din of the water, a man's voice shouting to him. Steele's eyes darkened as they had not darkened that day, clouded to an anger such as the man seldom experienced. For the moment he was, in sober earnest, as a king into the privacy of whose meditations some offending mortal had intruded.

"I don't believe in being inhospitable," he grumbled deep in his throat, "but they'll just have to clean out and leave us alone, old goblet."

There were two of them and he turned to watch as they came on toward him across the tableland.

CHAPTER V

ORDERS TO MOVE ON

IF you have ever penetrated deep into some shadowy forest with never the feel of a man-made trail under foot, if you have known that unique thrill which comes with the sensation of being utterly alone save for the tall trees and silent mountains, the sunlight and bickering waters, if there has come to you the grateful emotion born of the thought that perhaps, except for your own, no human foot has ever come into this particular sequestered spot since old time was in swaddling clothes, if just then a chance glance at a creek's edge showed you an old fragment of newspaper or an empty and rusting sardine can . . . then could you understand and sympathetically condone the first rush of disgust with the situation which filled Steele's heart. Long and across many miles had this hidden, little trodden corner of the big world called to him, long had he enjoyed in anticipation those first few idle hours alone with the solitude. This late afternoon had found him in tune with his surroundings; he was "ready for it." And, though a man usually as slow to anger as he was quick to mirth, for the moment he yielded to a wrath as instinctive as it was illogical.

The two men came on. They were big, rough looking fellows who might have been timberjacks, pick and shovel men strayed from Camp Corliss, or any other undesirable representatives of the human species for

whose companionship Steele had no present craving. As he faced them the low sun was full in their blinking eyes. So, while it was given them to read little or nothing in Steele's expression, he did not fail to note that they approached him with purpose in their very stride, that had business with him.

"Say, pardner," said the foremost of the two whom, had she seen the physique of him, Beatrice Corliss must have admitted one of Hurley's best men, "orders is to move on. No prospectors or campers allowed. Guess you'll have to hit the trail again. It's only a little piece that way," and he swung out a long arm toward the south, "an' you're off the ranch an' there's a good campin' spot."

With the first words the anger in Steele's heart had swollen so that his big fists shut down hard; before the last word had come the anger had passed, instantly replaced by a rising sense of the humour underlying the situation. Startling the two bearers of orders to him as perhaps nothing else short of his sprouting wings on the instant and sailing off over their heads could have done, he greeted them with the sudden boom of his big laughter. Hurley's two messengers stopped dead in their tracks like one man, their eyes running swiftly from him to each other, back to him in frowning uncertainty. It is not to be wondered at if their initial impression was that they had to do with a lunatic.

"Look here," growled the spokesman, drawing his hat brim down to shut the sun out of his eyes a little, "don't you try to get fresh, stranger. Orders is, get out. Now suppose you travel!"

Steele, resigning himself utterly to the pure joy he extracted no less from the two somewhat bewildered countenances confronting him than from the situation itself, greeted them with a second volley of laughter.

"I wouldn't have missed this for a house and lot," he choked.

"What's that?" demanded the other, failing to catch the words and naturally suspicious of their portent. "If you think you can guy me, why damn you, just you try it on an' see."

"Wait a minute before you sail into me," chuckled Steele. "It's funny, only you don't see the funny part yet. You will in a minute. You order me off and that's what I was getting ready to do for you! As you show up I'm saying to myself: 'They're two real nice looking boys, but I want the woods to myself a little. They'll just have to move on!' And before I can get the words out you're wanting *me* to clean out!"

Even with the explanation before them they did not appear to laugh with him. A score of paces away they frowned against the sun, staring at him, entirely out of harmony with his mood.

"We ain't got all night to chin in," offered the man who as yet had not spoken. "Suppose you take your traps an' beat it back to where your horse is. We're gettin' ready to make a fire an' eat."

"Well," rejoined Steele, safe again in his serene good humour, "you'd better hurry. For if you eat your own cooking tonight it'll be back at the Little Giant. I'm strong for two things: first, staying just

exactly where I am, second, being alone. Don't like to appear inhospitable, but since you've started it, you've got to skip out. And say, you Bill Rice, you tell Ed Hurley for me he ought to know better than to try an old game of bluff on me."

"Huh!" said Bill Rice, the bulkier, squattier of the two, who still stood a pace in the fore. "Know me, do you? I ain't got you, though, stranger."

"Come a little closer, Bill," laughed Steele. "And get the sun out of your eyes."

Rice did both, moving slowly, curiosity in his eyes. Suddenly an amazed grunt broke from him, followed by a wide grin and an extended hand that was gripped hard in Steele's.

"Bill Steele, by God!" he cried warmly. "Why, you ol' son of a gun! Say, you fit in a man's eyes nice as a new bottle o' hootch! I had the notion you was dead down in Mexico an' your bones picked over by a coyote. You ol' son of a gun, you! 'Member when me an' you, jus' two U. S. Bills, stood 'em off down to Dos Hermanas?"

"You sawed-off, hammered-down old rock of ages, of course I remember. Only four years ago, after all, Bill. Who's your friend?"

"Turk Wilson," answered Bill Rice. "Step up, Turk, an' shake hands with Mr. Steele, Bill Steele that I've tol' you about more'n once when you an' me was both drunk."

Turk, whose name smacking of the oriental was obviously bestowed to him for the fiery red of his complexion, came forward much after the fashion of an

old bear with the rheumatism, grasped Steele's hand and said, "Howdy."

"If you boys haven't eaten," suggested Steele, "why not take chuck with me? I was just going to get a fire started."

"Sure," agreed Rice heartily. "If you got plenty?"

"You start the fire, Bill," said Steele, kneeling beside his saddle, his fingers busy with the thongs about his rod. "Open my roll of blankets and you'll find coffee and the Hibernian fruit and some flour and stuff. Give me ten minutes and I'll bring in the trout. There's the spot handy where I can get 'em any time, day or night."

"Go to it, Bill," retorted Rice. "I'm listenin'. . . . Ol' Bill Steele, by gravy!"

Then as Steele slipped away among the great boulders, seeking a pool whose memory had been a bit of treasure carried long, Bill Rice squatted on the ground and slowly a wide grin stretched his mouth.

"Orders to chuck a man off the ranch," he beamed upon his friend Turk Wilson, "an' that man turns out to be ol' Bill Steele. The son of a gun! Can you beat it, eh, Turk? Haw!"

Turk Wilson, content to watch Rice working with the blanket roll, made himself comfortable with his broad back to a tree and with big knotted hands set about cutting himself a chew from a slab of plug tobacco.

"Hurley tol' me we was lookin' for a man name of Steele mos'ly," he admitted slowly. Not a man given

to much talk, Turk Wilson drew out what few words he used drawlingly, "to make 'em go as far as possible," as Bill Rice had remarked about him.

"You di'n't say so to me," grunted Rice.

"Nope," responded Turk.

"If you had," resumed the man, who now had the roll open and was sorting out the medley of its contents, "I wouldn't of come. I'd of tol' Ed to get some other guy on the job."

Turk shut his monster pocket knife and put it away, replacing what he had left of the plug in a hip pocket.

"'Cause," resumed Bill Rice thoughtfully, "Bill Steele's as good a frien' as I ever had."

Turk scratched his head, nodded and seemed on the verge of drowsing.

"Bacon an' spuds," said Rice. "Onions an' cawffy. Sugar, I guess. Prunes. Say, I tol' you already, didn't I, about me an' Bill mixin' with them ginks down to Dos Hermanas?"

"Can't say as you have," returned the non-committal Turk.

"It was this way: You see I was carryin' a reg'lar pay day load an' when I'm that-away I don't like a man to talk the lingo like he's makin' fun o' me. So I get somethin' started with the Mex barkeep an' some frien's of his'n. In about a minute, before I good an' got started, we'd busted some chairs an' bottles an' furniture an' things, about a hundred dollars' worth, Mexican money. There was seven or eleven of them dark, han'some little gents pokin' knives at me when ol' Bill Steele walks in. Say, Turk, you oughta heard him war-

whoop when he sees it's one white man an' that white man me, stacked up against that congregation of greasers! Nex' thing anybody knows . . . Say, for the love of Mike, Turk, are you jus' goin' to squat there all night waitin' fer me to peel the spuds an' make the hot cakes an' cawffy an' things? Get a fire goin', can't you?"

Turk sighed, bestirred himself and began to gather dry sticks for the evening blaze. Fifteen minutes later through the little staccato noises of a further lot of fuel snapping in his big hands and the booming of the waters of Hell's Goblet, there came the sound of Steele's voice, lifted mightily. Turk paused in his labours and cocked his head to one side, listening. Bill Rice, laying knife blade to side of bacon, stopped and turned a little to hear better.

"Fell in, maybe," suggested Turk. "Can't he swim?"

"Fell in, nothin'," grunted Rice. "He's singin'. Lord, ain't that man got a voice!"

"The voice ain't so bad," remarked Turk. "But the tune is. He goes up when by rights he oughta come down."

Whereupon Turk began whistling softly, melodiously indicating just what notes were demanded by the composer of a very popular selection from *Il Trovatore*. He could whistle, could Turk Wilson, and beautifully.

"That's the way she goes by rights," he amended the procedure.

"Yes, sir, Bill Steele's got a voice a man might travel a mile to hear . . . if travellin' was necessary. Which it ain't. Why, Turk, I remember the time me an' Bill

was prospectin' down in Arizona an' him an' me got separated an' Bill climbs up on a sand hill an' turns that ol' voice of his loose an' I hear him across five miles sand an' sage. Fact."

"Hm." Turk resumed his labour of fuel gathering.
"Five mile? Hm."

"But then you see," added Bill Rice hastily, "that was down on the desert. It's different there, the air bein' that clear I've saw a mountain off fifty mile that didn't look more'n a two hours' walk."

"Well," and Turk surrendered to unanswerable argument, "that might be, too."

"How in heck am I goin' to boil cawffy when he's forgot to bring along a cawffy pot to boil it in?" demanded Rice. "Now, Bill Steele oughta know better'n that."

Turk lighted his fire, piled sufficient dry branches ready to hand and returned to his tree. He watched his companion interestedly but offered neither advise nor aid. His air was plainly that of a man whose worries, of whatsoever nature, lay behind him.

"We got to chase him off the ranch, jus' the same," was his cheerful remark after a long silence. "I got my orders straight from Ed Hurley."

"Damn Ed Hurley," was Rice's outspoken way of removing a difficulty. "He didn't know which Steele it was."

"He did, though; he said 'A big, copper headed guy name of Bill Steele.' An' what's more he wrote a letter I'm to give him."

"Well," snapped Bill Rice, with more of disgust

than of irritation in his voice, "if you ain't the most secreetive cuss I ever travelled with I'm a Mexico dawg. Why didn't you say so? That letter'll make it all right with Steele an' all we got to do is fork it over an' we're through."

"Ain't so," said Turk equably. "It don't explain nothin' a-tall."

"Did Hurley tell you what it says?"

"Can't I read? It jus' says . . . Wait a minute."

Turk brought out of an inside vest pocket a folded bit of paper and a crumpled envelope; the latter he discarded as of no moment. And in the singsong of an illiterate man who reads aloud, he declaimed:

"Dear Billy: If this comes to you the boys will tell you as much as I know. Orders from headquarters for you to keep off the ranch. First I knew of your being back in this part of the world. Run over and see me as soon as you can and we'll try to straighten matters out. Don't get your back up and start something, because the Queen has got you dead to rights this trip; it's her ranch and that's an end of it. Look me up. Good luck.

"EDW. HURLEY."

"There you are," finished Turk. "So far as bein' any news in it you might as well throw it away, huh?"

The sun was down among the trees upon the ridge when Steele came back into camp. And, though he had gone downstream upon leaving Rice and Wilson, he now appeared from above so that again the sun was in their eyes as they looked up at him. With a willow branch through their dripping gills he carried three fat trout; in the other hand was an old, black coffee pot.

"I didn't think you was the man to forget it," said Bill Rice as he accepted it and spilled some coffee into the water it contained. "By the way, Bill, ol' Turk's got a letter for you from Hurley."

Steele read the few words by the fading light, stood for a moment regarding them thoughtfully, then tossed the paper to the flames.

"Judging by the finger and thumb marks on it," he said evenly, "I hardly suppose it's necessary to tell you what he says? Fry out some bacon, Bill, and Turk and I will have the fish ready to go into the hot grease. Fresh trout in bacon grease, washed down with good black coffee . . . you can't beat it, eh, boys?"

"Goin' to do like Hurley says, Bill?" asked Rice, busy with the coals.

"I'll be tickled to pieces to see him. Tell him I'll run in and swap talk with him just as soon as I finish my vacation."

"How long` did you say that was?"

Steele laughed.

"Can't tell, Bill. When a man is just back in the woods after a long spell in town he doesn't know any more than the man in the moon just how long it will be before he wants to break out of them. A week, or a couple of weeks, I'd say."

Turk, employing his big knife at fish cleaning, looked up briefly.

"Let's eat an' talk business afterwards," he suggested.

CHARTER VI

STEELE'S CACHE

HAVIN' et your grub, Mr. Steele," observed Turk Wilson when at last his back was again to the big tree and his great bladed knife had returned to his pocket from its latest assault upon his slab of tobacco, "it would sure go against the grain if me an' Bill had to throw you off the ranch forcible. Let's talk."

"Mr. Wilson," responded Steele gravely and in the coin of Turk's own courtesy, "you are a man of parts. We'll talk."

He stretched himself out full length on the ground by the freshly replenished fire which cast its red, companionable glow upon three contented faces. With an elbow sunk in the short grass, his head propped up upon his palm, his pipe puffing slowly, he was in a softened mood and, like Turk, with no stomach for violent cross purposes. Bill Rice, squatting upon the heels of his heavy boots, treating himself to the dregs of the black coffee, nodded his pleasure in the amicable hour.

"To begin with then," continued Steele genially, "I have come to stay and I am going to stay for some little time. Furthermore, I have a perfect right to do so, without offering any explanations. But, because Bill Rice here is a mighty good friend of mine and because I want Turk Wilson for a friend, too, I am going to tell

you boys something that isn't very well known yet. I am at this minute on my own land."

No change came into Turk Wilson's red, immobile face. Bill Rice, however, showed his surprise frankly at the information.

"How's that come about, Steele?" he demanded.

"Very naturally, Bill," answered Steele. "But we're not here for the discussion of unnecessary details, are we? All we need to go into at present is that the ground you're squatting on, with eighty acres including the Goblet yonder and a nice little stretch of timber land, belongs to me."

"If you was most any other man I know," said Bill Rice after his own blunt fashion, "I'd say liar to you, Steele."

"But since I am not any other man you know I am giving it to you straight, eh, Bill? Thanks, old man."

Rice discarded his cup, scratched his head and finally shrugged his ample shoulders.

"Well, Turk," he said thoughtfully, "I guess we're through? Ed Hurley musta got his signals mixed."

"My orders," muttered Turk, "was to run him out. Especial if he was Bill Steele. Orders straight from Ed an' he got 'em straight from the Queen. When I take a man's pay . . . yes, or a woman's . . . I always obey orders. Always did."

He stopped. Both Steele and Bill Rice watched him interestedly, awaiting the next words. But Turk Wilson, having set himself his proposition, took his own time in working it out. For full five minutes there was only

the cheerful sound of the crackling fire to speak through the thunder of falling waters, voicing the presence of men.

"You said it, Bill," announced Turk at last. "You said if he was any other man than Bill Steele you'd name him a liar. Seein' as it's funny Ed Hurley an' Miss Corliss don't know her own land yet. Not meanin' anything to stir up bad blood, but jus' thinkin' as a man does, how do *I* know Steele ain't lyin'?"

He had set the matter fairly enough, offering no occasion for resentment. Steele felt none. Rather was he humorously disposed to watch for the solution of Turk's self-imposed problem. Bill Rice, rocking back and forward on his heels, gave the matter its due consideration.

"What if I told you, Turk," he said after a little, "that we made a mistake? That you an' me, right now, is trespassin' on Bill Steele's place?"

"But do you tell me that?" asked the cautious Turk. "Honest an' true, cross your heart?"

Bill Rice, still a trifle uncertain, looked across the fire to his old friend, the man who had asked no questions but accepted the half of Bill Rice's quarrel down in Mexico. Steele, meeting his look frankly, nodded. Bill Rice turned again to Turk.

"Yes," he then answered Turk's direct question. "Bill Steele's word is good enough for me to tie my word to. This here is his land, Turk, but I'm teetotally damned if I sabe the play."

Turk waved his hand widely.

"That makes no never mind," he announced calmly.

"I guess that's Steele's business an' it ain't ours. The rest is up to Ed an' the Queen."

He sighed, stretched his thick arms above his touselled head, yawned widely and rose to his feet. He had ended this first conference at Hell's Goblet and the darkness was thickening.

"It's a half mile to our camp, Bill," he reminded his companion. "An' I've a notion to travel before it gets any darker so's not to break my neck on a rock pile. G' night, Steele."

"Good night, Wilson," said Steele.

Rising with Bill Rice he put out his hand.

"I'm much obliged, Bill," he said quietly.

Rice, as their hands met, stood looking Steele squarely in the eye for a long moment.

"It looks funny, damn' funny, to me," he said slowly.

"I always thought this was her land, Hurley always thought so, an' it's open an shut she ain't sold to you! Dead sure you ain't made a mistake, Steele?"

"Dead sure, Bill."

"Then," said Rice, "good night."

And he followed Turk Wilson's disappearing form into the deeper darkness where what they were pleased to term a trail led down to their camp. When both men were gone from sight Steele was chuckling in anticipation of complications ahead. But, with his own camp preparations still before him he turned back to his fire, threw on an armful of dead branches and set about making his bed.

Tomorrow he would cut fir boughs for his mattress; tonight he was content to spread his blankets out upon

the mat of dry needles the winds had shaken from the waving limbs above him. Selecting a spot which suited his fancy he went whistling about his task, the bit of canvas which had served as outside wrapper for his bedding placed down first for warmth, his saddle dragged into place for pillow, his rifle in its case just under the outer edge of his blankets less through a desire to have it handy than through long habit. He drew off his boots, completed his simple preparations for the night, slipped in between his blankets with a big sigh of content.

"When a man can have this sort of thing for nothing," he mused quite as he had done many a time before, quite as many another man had done before Bill Steele came down into the world, "why does he sweat for money to buy himself electric lights that are not in it with the stars, music that tries to copy and can't touch the sound of falling water, a bed that isn't in the same class with a pile of fresh fir boughs or a heap of pine needles?"

The thoughts of a contented man on the verge of drowsing are not usually logically connected.

"That Turk Wilson is a man, a real man," he pondered. "I don't know that either Napoleon or Richard of the Lion Heart had much on him. . . . I wonder how little Trixie is going to accept the news?"

And as he went to sleep, conscious of something tranquilly maternal in the brooding solitudes about him, his last thought was of the vanished mother who, when Billy Steele was a very little boy, had held him in her arms before she tucked him in for the good night kiss.

The faint breeze which found its gentle way here through the forest and world of rocks touched his hair like her fingers. . . .

In the keen dawn he was joyously awake. His clothes caught up under one arm, he ran down to a pool whose waters were lambs to the roaring lions of the Goblet, poised a moment in white nakedness upon a favourite flat rock, then leaped out and down, gone from the sight of a curious and chattering chipmunk in the spray his own big body flung upward. He beat his way across the ten-foot-wide pool, threshing the water mightily, feeling it laid like ice against him, turned, swam back with vigorous strokes, emerged and climbed upward along the rocks, dripping, warm, laughing, his chest swelling deeply, his blood running gloriously.

" . . . and for bath tubs," he completed last night's contented musings, "when neither king nor queen can buy better than this!"

Breakfast, both in the preparation and in the eating, was a sheer joy. The smell of frying bacon set him sniffing with a keenness of natural desire, the aroma of coffee in a black and battered pot whose spout and handle had long ago joined the army of the unnecessary luxuries, mingled in perfect harmony with the other incenses of the camp fire. The flapjacks, mixed with water and fried in sizzling hot bacon grease, were in Steele's mind quite the brownest, most fascinating flapjacks it had ever been his pleasure to encounter. Fascinating, no less; brown, tempting beauties.

The morning meal done with, his pipe going, Steele set his camp in order, made experienced provision

against a destructive inroad of forest rodents and prepared to take stock of a five-years'-old cache. Last night he had had but the brief time to fumble in the gloom for his coffee pot; today all time was his.

First with a long, searching look directed down stream, then through the woods on either hand to make sure that neither Bill Rice nor Turk Wilson was on the way to pay him an early call, he turned westward, crossed his little plateau and passed down through the boulders, drawing closer to Hell's Goblet. Here the ravine in which were cradled the beginnings of Thunder River was steep sided, granite walled and narrow. Beyond and above the Goblet Steele came to a flat topped rock, overhanging the rugged waterway, whence a man, did he care to take the chance of death below, might have leaped across. But the chance was not one to be accepted lightly, not to be considered without a little shiver along the spine. Looking down, straight down, one saw an inferno of mad waters and jagged rocks.

He passed on, watchful of each step now, clinging to the rocks with hands and feet, continuing to work his way upstream even while he sought to draw constantly nearer the stream below. The sun was up, brightening the tree tops, but no direct rays came to him now as he found the old way down to the stream's riotous edge. In a little strip of wet sand were the tracks made by his boots last night. Here he stopped again to look about him, to make certain that no one watched as he went to his secret place.

Just here the cañon widened, here the water spread

out and ran something more placidly, here, to mark each marge, was a pigmy beach of sand and polished stones. Both above and below the rock walls drew in towards each other so that they were little more than a score of feet apart; here was a circular space three times a score of feet in diameter.

Steele followed the tracks he had made last night; later on he would obliterate them as he had no mind to leave them pointing out his cache to the first chance comer. After this he would come down a longer way, leaving no sign of his passing upon the granite blocks and slabs. In after times the spot to which he now was going would be known rather widely as Steele's Cache; he had found it, he had used it, he had kept it his secret and now he counted it in every sense his own.

A half dozen paces further and he left the sandy margin of the stream, beginning to climb again; his body pressed tight against the rock wall. Here, underfoot, was the natural semblance of a path, never wider than twelve inches, often barely allowing foothold. Upon the cañon's sides were occasional bushes, infrequently patches of brush driving hardy roots into soil filled fissures. By gripping a ledge above his head and drawing himself up, Steele came into one of these clumps of mountain brush, to his cache and its hidden door. Hidden because in the rocks there was but the small uneven opening masked by the bushes and further sealed years ago by a slab of stone he himself had dragged into place.

With a final sweeping glance which took in the widened, circular bed of the river and the opposite bank,

he set his eager hands to the rock which he had replaced last night, drew it aside, went down on his hands and knees and squirmed in through the narrow passage-way. On all fours he passed through a downward slanting natural tunnel, darkness thick about him, chuckling as he went at the memory of his first coming here when he had wondered what sort of lair he was sticking his fool head into.

Presently he stood up, though still must he crouch, still was the darkness opaque about him. From his pocket he took the little electric flash light which he had bought in San Francisco in a moment alive with anticipation. As its circle of light now leaped out before him he stood regarding the walls of the cavern into which he had entered with a quick eyed satisfaction. Since the child has been father to the man there has never yet lived the man who could not draw lively interest from a spot such as this.

About him the broken floor was strewn with fallen bits of stone, and with the small and shattered bones of such unfortunate woodland beings as had come hither in the strong jaws of wild cat or mountain lion. The rock floor itself plunged downward steeply, the walls showed ancient water action, the roof was sculptured by time's patient tools into odd, grotesque shapes which as Steele's light found them seemed to take life into their cold shapes, to swell their iron lungs with slow breathing.

He went on and down. At last he could stand erect; in a moment he could not reach the stone ceiling with his finger tips. The cave widened until it was a rude, irreg-

ular room; narrowed so that as he walked he could brush the rock at both sides with his elbows; widened again after a long, winding, still descending passage-way. And now at length, when he was again at a level with the tumbling waters in the river bed, did the cavern open up to its greatest size and did he come into fresher air, a subdued light and view of his "plunder" secreted five years ago.

In this lofty cavern a man might have built himself a house of half a dozen rooms. Ages ago . . . how many, Steele wondered . . . the water had found its way in here, and never resting had toiled through the little seconds which were drawn out into long centuries, breaking down, bearing away, wearing smooth with its fine chisels of sand and particles.

At the side of the cave furthest from the river was a pile of familiar objects. Steele went to it, picking out details in the circle of his light. An axe with blade rusted a bit, pick and shovel, a half dozen cooking utensils, black from many fires, a coil of rope, some loops of wire, a jumble of odds and ends from his last camp at Hell's Goblet.

"Just as I left them," was his thought. "Just as a man could count upon their remaining not five years but five hundred after he put them there. . . . And telling me that no one had come here since I came."

The thought brought its contentment.

CHAPTER VII

BEATRICE RISES EARLY

DAWN in the woods is the signal for general renewal of activity. If Steele was about with the first pale glimmerings of the new day, so were robins, bluebirds, noisy jays, and the soft-footed, furred denizens of the forests. So were Turk Wilson and Bill Rice who, though with no thought to the adage which commands "when in Rome do as the Romans," responded to the stimulus of environment and emulated the great hidden army of the solitudes. By the time Steele had turned upstream toward his cave Turk Wilson was headed downstream to report to Ed Hurley at the Little Giant. Rice, in obedience to the second of the commands laid upon them, was to spend the day in a spiritless search for the gold he was confident would never be found here.

For half of the six miles lying between last night's camp and the mine Turk followed the river's side. Then, when the boiling stream began to describe its wide curve which turned it again westward and toward ranch headquarters, Turk set his back to it, climbed the ridge ahead, and trudged on straight to the east. He came to the first of the cabins, the one used by Ed Hurley as his office and sleeping quarters, before the mine superintendent was awake. Turk pounded heavily upon the door.

"Who is it?" came Hurley's voice, sleepy and disgusted. "What the devil do you want?"

"It's me," was Turk's entirely to be expected answer. "Come to report."

The sound of bare feet thudding on the floor, of a bolt shot back and with the door thrown open before him Turk stalked in.

"Hang it, man," snapped Hurley, "why can't you wait to report until you are asked to? I'm not paying you for walking back and forth across country and waking me up this time of day."

"Bill Steele's out there," said Turk imperturbably. "I give him your letter. Says he'll see you in a week or so. Meantime he won't budge."

Ed Hurley, though Steele stood high in his esteem, grunted savagely. He went back to his bed, sat down upon its edge and stared at Turk who in turn stared back at the trowselled head, sleepy eyes and big, bony form of his pajamaed superior.

"Plague take Billy Steele!" grumbled Hurley. "Doesn't he know I'm jumping half a dozen ways already, without his starting in any funny monkey business? . . . What else did he say, Turk?"

"Said he wouldn't go because he wasn't on the Queen's land a-tall. Says it belongs to him. Bill Rice ups and says Steele ain't given to lyin'. So we quit right there."

Incredulity came into Ed Hurley's eyes.

"Where did you find him?" he demanded.

"On the little flat by Hell's Goblet. Says he owns eighty acres in there."

"Say anything else?"

"Nope."

For a moment Hurley frowned at him thoughtfully, irritation gone before puzzled wonderment. Then, reaching for the telephone on his table, he said shortly:

"Stick around for further orders."

Turk nodded and went out. Hurley, sitting very still, his hand upon the telephone instrument, for a little seemed in doubt. Then with a suddenness which was like an attack on the line he was about to employ, rang the one long bell which was a call at headquarters for Beatrice Corliss.

"Yes?" came a voice not too sleepy to sound decidedly cross. "Who is it?"

"It's Hurley," said the man in pajamas briefly. "One of my men has just come in with the report that Steele is at the Goblet, that he refuses to move off . . ."

Beatrice Corliss was wide awake now; Hurley could imagine how his words had made her sit bolt upright, could even fancy a quick flash in her eyes.

"I told you," came her words with unmistakable emphasis, "not to allow that man on my property. I don't want reports; I want Steele put off my ranch. Forcibly, if necessary."

"But," returned Hurley, "he sends back word that he is not trespassing; that he is on his own land; that he owns eighty acres at the Goblet."

A little gasp from Miss Corliss as her leaping fancy sought to measure those supreme heights of impudence

to which Bill Steele might rise. And after the gasp a curt, angry,

"Liar! Mr. Hurley, you should know once and for all that you can believe nothing that that man says. He . . . he . . ."

The wire connecting the ranch house with Hurley's cabin recorded a sharply indrawn breath of impotent fury. Hurley chuckled, but had the forethought to put his big hand over the receiver.

"Mr. Hurley," and now her voice came with a coolness which caused Hurley to nod his approval of her quick mastery of her anger and, perhaps, of the situation, "I cannot tolerate incompetence. I directed you to send two of your *best men* to drive Steele off the ranch. They have failed to obey orders. I am not interested in excuses. You will immediately discharge both men."

"They're Turk Wilson and Bill Ri . . ."

"I don't care to know who they are, thank you," said Miss Corliss in a tone which Hurley recognized. "They are both discharged. You will inform them of that fact without delay. Further, your orders still stand: If you can't handle the situation before dark I'll not hesitate to accept your resignation. That's all, I believe."

And so far as further discussion just now was concerned that was an end of the matter. The Queen, taking advantage of the royal prerogative, had hung up at the other end of the line.

"Damn!" said Ed Hurley softly but none the less emphatically.

But even as he began a savage dressing, he gave begrudgingly of his admiration to the young woman who had cut him off. She was Ben Corliss' daughter over and over, clear thoughted, direct, capable, the driver of many a hard bargain, one who gave orders crisply and counted confidently upon their being obeyed to the letter. The details oftener than not she was content to leave in the hands of her agents; now she did not concern herself in the least with the manner of Steele's removal. What she asked at all times was results.

"I wonder what's up between Bill and her?" pondered Hurley, busy with his boots. "He's most certainly riled her up a few! And I don't know the man to do the job better than Bill Steele. I'll bet she doesn't go back for her beauty sleep this trip."

Nor did she. Beatrice Corliss was awake for the day, wide awake. That man . . . so she had grown into the habit of thinking of Mr. William Steele . . . having begun with impertinence which was in her mind close to insult, now rose to defiance. And never in all the days of her life until this morning had a man openly defied her. There had been reasons. Hers was that crushing power of massed millions which was to be considered with forethought and circumspection. If acquaintances did not like Beatrice Corliss, and she had the brains to know that there were those who did not, they were at least aware of the foolishness of antagonizing the machinery of the Corliss money. Men who came from near by or from distances to speak with her came invariably upon business and with no desire to

displease her. She had been spoiled in her childhood through being the single child of very wealthy parents; she had been spoiled in more recent years through being an arbiter in many affairs in which other hands than her own found it poor policy to lift themselves against her. In short, very largely for the simple reason that it didn't pay to seek to thwart her, to Bill Steele remained the distinction of being the first man to bring home to Beatrice Corliss the full sense of a word she detested, defiance.

Though she had played the part of a bountiful hostess until a very late hour last night, though if Hurley's call had not awakened her she would have slept on until nine or ten o'clock, she now gave no thought to further rest. Dressed a great deal more quickly than was her custom, she went through the quiet house while her guests were still sleeping soundly and came quickly into the dim light of her office. Set in a row in her table top were three electric push buttons. In turn she set her finger to each of the three, holding it tight down until a bell in Booth Stanton's cabin had jingled ten seconds, another in Bradford's room still another ten seconds, while the third gave its insistent message to Miss Corliss' maid. That she had not so much as thought of her serving woman until after she had dressed herself was in itself significant.

Though Booth Stanton was the only one of the three not in the house, he was the first to come to the office, his rudely laced boots bespeaking his haste, the question standing in his eyes testifying to the novelty of a summons from her at such an hour. As his form

outlined itself in the outer doorway her eyes were upon her wall clock; it marked twenty-five minutes after six.

"You know what my system is, Stanton," she said by way of answer to his quiet "Good morning." "Next to myself you are in power from one end to the other of my ranch here, yours is the responsibility. So, if anything goes wrong, in the final analysis of it you are to blame."

"Something has gone wrong then?" asked Stanton, his pulses quickened with his vague alarm.

"No," she retorted coolly. "And nothing is going any way excepting as I want it to. Yesterday I gave certain orders to Ed Hurley. Those orders have not been carried out. You appointed Hurley to his present position. You are responsible for him."

Bradford, looking as though all night he had not been out of his clothes and had not so much as lain down in them but must have slept standing, came in closely followed by an anxious, half frightened looking girl clutching at her clothing.

"Bradford," said Miss Corliss, "have Parker bring out my roadster; you can help him run it by hand into the court. I don't want the engine waking my guests. Della, have my breakfast served immediately in my room."

Bradford and Della vanished, carrying her orders. She turned again toward the mystified Booth Stanton.

"You, Stanton," she directed, without choosing to answer any of his unspoken questions, "will immediately telephone Hurley. Learn from him what he intends

doing. Discharge him by six o'clock tonight if that man Steele is still on my property."

The first glint of understanding came into Stanton's dark eyes. He made no response and the girl continued:

"Hurley will put you in possession of all the facts. You will instruct him for me that I shall expect him to have Steele acquainted with my decision within an hour; it should not take longer than that for him or his men to get from the Little Giant to the Goblet. You may tell him or not, as you please, that I count upon having the pleasure of witnessing Mr. Steele's ejection. In other words, as soon as I have breakfasted I will have Parker drive me as far as the Big Bend; from there it's only three miles to the Goblet, isn't it?"

"Yes," nodded Stanton.

"Very well. It's also about three miles from the mine? Then you are to have my horse there by the time I get there. I imagine," drily, "that you won't have much time to spare, Mr. Stanton. I'll expect you there, too, to ride with me to the Goblet. And," with a sudden flash in her eyes, "as many men as you and Ed Hurley think necessary to throw one man off my land. That is all."

Stanton wheeled and went. But before calling up Hurley he telephoned the stables to have Miss Corliss' horse and his own saddled. He had an idea he was going to have the devil's own day of it, with his work cut out for him getting to the Big Bend before any car that Parker would drive this morning. In the

latter surmise he would no doubt have been entirely correct were it not for the fact that a certain dynamic individual named Joe Embry required considerably less sleep than most men. In the former portion of his hazard at prophetic vision Booth Stanton was not far in error.

Beatrice Corliss, left alone, turned to a sheet of paper lying upon her table top, held securely by the sturdy feet of a little bronze tiger. On it was written the message which had come over her telephone wire from her lawyers last night, jotted down by her own hand as she received it:

"Time required for thorough investigation. Attended personally however to all titles and deeds when your father increased his holdings. Confident no flaw anywhere in your title. Giving the matter immediate attention.—ROLLINS."

"It's just a big game of bluff!" cried Beatrice, the hand holding the paper suddenly clenching. "The man is a fool."

Then it was that Joe Embry, that one of her guests who yesterday afternoon had seized the first moment of his arrival to question her concerning Steele, appeared upon the veranda, smiling in through the open door.

"Miss Corliss, you are absolutely the most constantly surprising young woman in the world. I tell you good night at one o'clock, and here at half past six I find you dispensing justice in the throne room!"

Beatrice, her frown gone, smiled. Embry always addressed her thus and though long ago all novelty had

departed from the queenly epithets bestowed upon her she unfailingly found this man's gentle flattery pleasant. It seemed a part of himself and of the man she approved.

"Come in," she invited brightly. "I want to talk with you."

Even as he entered, moving with that slow grace of his which was oddly at variance with the look of his keen, quick eyes, Beatrice found herself vaguely wondering just what it was that made Joe Embry "different." Last night he had been as merry, care-free, inconsequential as the most boyish of her other guests. This morning his serenity was that of a man who had slept his allotted, untroubled hours; his mood seemed one ready for mere banter. And yet, always and always, he brought with him that subtle sense of quiet mastery, of forceful certainty of himself and of fate, which long ago had appealed to something in the girl. If she ever required an adviser she believed that she could turn unhesitatingly to Joe Embry. And yet, what did she really know of him? Only the very little which Joe Embry had given her to understand: that he was of her class socially and financially, at once possessed of what leisure he desired and sufficient money to make more money for him. . . . He was courteous, even now he unnecessarily tossed away a freshly lighted cigar.

"I await the royal pleasure," he said lightly.

"Yesterday," said Beatrice in the direct fashion of her business moods, "you mentioned a man named William Steele, you called him a crook, you cautioned me

against him. He is the cause of my being about so early this morning. He has camped upon the southwest corner of my land and, though told to move on, has so far refused to do so."

The keen probe of Joe Embry's eyes from between slightly narrowed lids merely indicated that he waited for her to continue, reserving his judgment.

"He offered yesterday," Beatrice amplified succinctly, "to buy a section in there from me at a figure too high for grazing land of that type or inaccessible timber lands, too low for mineral lands. I refused to discuss the matter with him. His answer to me now is that already he owns eighty acres of my land. That if he doesn't obey orders to move on now it is because he is camped upon his own property."

Even now that she had summed up the essentials of the case Joe Embry held his thoughtful silence. A glance at him showed her that his eyes were hard and expressionless, that the muscles of his face were set in rigid inscrutability. Before he spoke he transferred his gaze from her to his hand which he raised slowly and held in front of him, studying it quite as though it and not William Steele were the matter under discussion. It was a large hand, even for a man, and altogether beautiful, as well groomed as Joe Embry himself, as eloquent of quiet strength, the fingers long, slightly tapering, firm, looking to be rarely sensitive.

Suddenly he lifted his head, looking straight and deep into her eyes, his expression altered, his lips relaxed into a smile.

"Dear lady," he said lightly, "I should hold myself

very fortunate if in some little way I could be of service to you. Though I do not know this man intimately I do know a good deal about him. Yes, I said that he was a crook; further I suggested that you look out for him. It appears that already he has started something. Just what . . . Will you let me ascertain for you? Will you allow me, in your behalf, to call on Mr. Steele this morning? ”

“ I am going myself ! ” cried Beatrice quickly. “ Not so much to be sure that my orders do not miscarry this time as to witness with my own eyes his ejection. If you care to accompany me . . . ”

“ Thank you, ” returned Embry. “ If you think it would not be better to leave an unpleasant bit of business to me . . . Well, of course, you know best. Only, I imagine he will prove stubborn. If he has refused once already . . . ”

“ Then, ” interrupted Beatrice with heat, “ he will be thrown off ! Surely I have men enough to handle Mr. William Steele. ”

Embry's smile broadened ; he laughed softly.

“ He will be thrown off. You are right, right as always. And I assure you, Miss Corliss, it will be a great pleasure to accompany you. ”

Beatrice rang and gave orders for a change in breakfast plans to include Mr. Embry. And Embry, again studying her through narrowed eyes, was deeply thoughtful. The gods of his destiny were offering him an opportunity. Perhaps merely an opportunity of service to the “ dear lady ” whom he unstintedly admired ? Or of beginning negotiations of a sort with

Bill Steele? Or, as the gamblers put it, of boosting Joe Embry's own game, whatever it might be?

At any rate he was manifestly pleased to share to any extent in her confidences. And Beatrice, vividly remembering the Bill Steele of yesterday, was more than glad today to have a man like Joe Embry accompany her.

CHAPTER VIII

THE QUEEN DECLARES WAR

THE new day, fresh, dewy and fragrant, seemed to laugh about them under the ardent return of the young sun as Beatrice Corliss and Joe Embry made their flashing journey toward the Big Bend. The last rose-flush faded from a sky which swiftly grew a deepening blue. Everywhere about them were the season's offerings, dew-wet and glistening, the blue and yellow field-flowers sprinkled with the springtime's favourite colours which are the same as those of the reborn year's feathered harbingers, bluebird and lusty, aureate-throated lark; on every hand a visioned riot of alert young buds vigorous with mounting sap, taking their bright places in the sun; from brushy hillsides came the clear, thrilling call of lookout quail, while from the distant big-timbered ridges floated out through the brightening air a sound as of a far-off, gentle sea. The shouting song of the river rose like the triumphant burst of booming, joyous voices, eternally young and eager. The insistent hum of Parker's six cylinders was at once a confident note of man's conquering might and a discord in the ear of the morning.

The girl and the man had fallen silent together. Beatrice, unaccustomed to early rising, passed unconsciously from reflection upon the day's plans to a quiet enjoyment of this glowing phase of the day itself. Joe

Embry, sitting back loosely, drawing slowly at the cigar she had requested him to smoke, was richly content to ponder his own plans and watch her. And this morning there was reason enough why a leisurely man should be satisfied just to ride with her and look at her. Never more than at this moment had Beatrice Corliss appeared richly alive, glowingly feminine, unquestionably beautiful. A man, told that here was the mistress of the Corliss' millions, might ignore the information, swiftly grasping the essential fact of a radiant loveliness no less vivid than that of the colourful world about her. A warm flush lay in her cheeks, she breathed deeply, enjoying the sheer sense of physical existence, her eyes shone softly. Like the sap in poplar buds, so did the blood in her body stir restlessly; like the little lifting everywhere of bent twigs and blades of grass, shaking down dew drops, so were there vague thrills and responses within her. Not only was she awake in the early morning; she was awake with it, electrically living the moment to the full because she was for the once in tune with it. Something like a reflected flush came slowly into Joe Embry's cheeks as he watched her.

Into the semi-intimate relationship which had gradually grown up between them there had never been so much as the suggestion of love-making. Beatrice had known Joe Embry casually for four years, had come to see a very great deal of him recently. During last winter's months, two San Franciscans in New York, they had found much in common. It had appeared that he was interested in certain ventures in which she had put money and they had talked together more of

dollars and cents than of daisies and sentiment. Latterly he had gotten in the way of calling her his dear lady, but in his manner as using this and kindred expressions there was more of friendly admiration for her intellectual capability than of homage to her strictly feminine attributes. Respect, admiration and sincere friendship, these were the emotions which she believed that she had kindled in Joe Embry.

Yet . . . and the mental reservation was but natural . . . other men of whom she had seen far less than of Joe Embry made love lightly or seriously, either prompted to an expression of that which she awoke in their souls or just for the sake of weaving bright wings for the passing hours. Joe Embry enjoyed the sole distinction of being a man who appreciated her, who liked her and still who never sought to lure her into the sentimental land of sweet dalliance. Joe Embry and . . . the sudden thought coming to her contracted her brows . . . the impudent Bill Steele. The man at her side and the man toward whom she was now hastening, that she might mete out proper punishment for his presumption; the man who seemed never to have thought of her as every man must think of some woman, and the laughing man who had said gaily:

“You see, I’m not in love with you, I’m not planning to fall for your quaint charm.”

The rebellious thought flashed into Beatrice’s mind:

“Just for that, Mr. William Steele, I could make you fall for me! And I would . . . if you were worth it . . .”

At the wide swerve of the river known as the Big

Bend they came upon a little knot of horsemen sitting restless, sweat-wet mounts. Parker brought his car quickly down from top speed to standstill. The men raised their hats. Joe Embry, lifting his own, smiled upon Beatrice.

"You get action out of your men," he said quietly. "You've got the trick of it."

"Learned from my father," she answered as she stepped out and to the road. "I pay them more than they can get from any one else. If they demur when an order goes out they lose their places. So they don't demur."

"Very simple," smiled Embry. "When you know how."

One swift glance had showed Beatrice Corliss just who the waiting men were. Booth Stanton was there, signs of perplexity showing in his eyes. Ed Hurley, clearly having been peremptorily summoned by Stanton, held his horse reined in close to Stanton's. Two other men, both of them familiar to Beatrice merely as little wheels in her big local machinery, one of them holding her own sorrel mare, looked on interestedly.

"Mr. Embry is riding with me," said Beatrice to Stanton when, her toe in Embry's hand, she had mounted. "He will want a horse."

Stanton nodded to the man who had led Beatrice's mare.

"Give Mr. Embry your horse," he said shortly. "You can report back to work."

Joe Embry swung up into the saddle and riding close behind Beatrice turned into the trail leading toward the

Goblet. After a brief word together, Stanton and Hurley followed them, sending the remaining mounted man back to the camp with the fellow on foot.

"It's the devil's own mess of an affair, any way you look at it," grunted Hurley savagely. "And plumb ridiculous. What's all the fuss about, do you suppose, Booth?"

"Don't know," snapped Stanton, his eyes moody as they rested upon the backs of Embry and Beatrice. "Miss Corliss wants Steele put off, and I guess she wants the joy of watching us chuck him. As for that Embry gent . . . brr!"

"Don't like him, eh?" laughed Hurley, ready to salve his own irritation by plaguing his friend. "She does, though. You'll have to shove him off a cliff, my boy, before you ever get a chance to . . ."

"Shut up," growled Stanton. "You're talking nonsense."

But a dark flush had crept up into his cheeks, and his eyes were frowning thoughtfully. Hurley shrugged, then dropping the reins to his horse's neck rolled a cigarette and abandoned the subject.

"Here we go," he said presently as, the four riders strung out singly in the narrow trail, he brought up the rear, "three able bodied men and a pretty girl, to chuck old Bill Steele off the earth! Steele'll see the humour of it; he's the man for seeing things like that. Don't know him, do you, Booth?"

"No, and don't want to," was Stanton's curt answer.

Again Ed Hurley shrugged and now gave over all attempt at conversation, for the remainder of the ride

speculating upon what had brought Bill Steele back here, what had set him down in the "Queen's" black books at so early a date, just what the game was, anyhow, where Joe Embry figured, and what was going to be the end of it all? Knowing both Miss Corliss and Mr. Steele as he did, Ed Hurley was of the opinion that perhaps life on the Thunder River ranch was going to prove interesting.

For the most part silence hung over the four traveling through the dusky woods. Beatrice herself, feeling a little thrill of excitement as she sought to look forward to the outcome, for the first half mile called frequently over her shoulder to Embry, relieving a slight nervous tension with casual chatter. But before long she grew silent as Hurley had done, sensing in Embry a thoughtlessness which for the first time which she could remember allowed no satisfactory response to her sallies. Once, when their way led for a little through a small open meadow and Embry rode at her side she noted that his face, though placid, was grave, that his eyes were narrowed meditatively. She turned from him frowning quickly, wondering what his thoughts were that he need turn them over so persistently, a little angered at him that he kept them locked up back of that immobile face of his.

Today Beatrice looked at the varied face of the country about her with new interest: it was hers, to have and to hold, and a man had come into it and defied her. She threw back her head, letting her eyes run to the dizzy heights of great, swaying tree tops, saying to herself: "Each tree is mine." She looked

out across brief stretches of grazing land to the barriers beyond of stubborn old mountains with always the thought: "They are mine." And, though she had ridden here before, now that another than herself sought to wrest from her that which until now she had thought of but lightly she saw through clearer eyes the rough majesty about her. It was as though this portion of her big holdings were brought to her attention for the first time by a hand reaching out to snatch it away from her. Again and again she wondered just what explanation she would find beneath Steele's attitude.

They forded the upper river where Steele had crossed in the late afternoon of yesterday, and soon came to his horse tethered in the meadow where he had left it. Here Beatrice and Embry waited for the others to come up with them.

"That way," said Hurley, pointing upstream. "There's the trail through the grass where Billy went, Turk and Rice after him."

"Billy?" Beatrice lifted her brows slightly. "You know him well, then?"

"Sure I do," said Hurley with emphasis. "I've known Billy Steele for a dozen years."

Beatrice dropped the subject, evincing no further interest but filing in her memory for possible future reference the fact that Ed Hurley and Steele were probably friends.

Presently they were forced to dismount as Steele had done before them, working their slow way among the rocks, leaving their horses tied in a little grove of young firs. Now and then Beatrice accepted Embry's

proffered hand, nodding her thanks. When they reached the small tableland at Hell's Goblet they came suddenly not only upon Steele's burnt out camp fire, but upon Turk Wilson and Bill Rice and Steele himself. The two recently discharged Little Giant men were squatting on their heels, smoking with every appearance of considerable enjoyment of the moment. Steele standing, the sun in his hair, his eyes mirthful and shining, waved his own pipe widely as he came forward, shouting in that big voice of his to vie with the boom of the water:

"The Queen! Your majesty is welcome, welcome as water on the desert. You honour our poor abode; the skyey roof for our house should be vaster and bluer, the woodland columns more massive. The Queen!"

Purposely had Beatrice mounted slowly to this plateau, meaning to bring cool cheeks and regular breathing to testify to Bill Steele that he had made never a dent in the smooth armour of her serenity. But the blood of Beatrice Corliss was red blood that ran swiftly, and as again she read in his greeting impudent mockery of the place she had made for herself in the world, her cheeks reddened to her ready anger.

Steele saw and laughed from the depths of his intolerable good humour and put out his big hand as still he came forward. Beatrice whipped her own behind her, her head lifted. But before she could speak or Steele so much as laugh again his eyes had passed from her to her companions. Without warning she saw the light change in his eyes, the careless good humour go

from his lips, his jaws set. He stopped dead in his tracks, his hand slowly going back to his side.

"So," he said after a brief silence in which Beatrice looked curiously from him to Joe Embry upon whose expressionless face Steele's eyes rested, "I find you again, do I, Joe Embry?"

Startled wonderment surged into Beatrice's heart, wonderment that that voice could be the voice of "that man" Steele. The boyish heartiness had flown from it, leaving it harder, colder, more implacable than she had ever known a man's tone could be. It was not raised in anger; rather was it hushed, so quiet that the words barely came to her attentive ears. And yet, unprepared for just this, she shivered at it and at what she read in his face. And now in Joe Embry's eyes, eyes which so seldom gossiped of what lay in Joe Embry's thought, she read the answer to Steele's look. It was but a flash that came and went with lightning swiftness, and yet in that vital instant it illuminated as brightly as lightning itself illumines the dark heavens, the thing that lay in Joe Embry's soul. Again Beatrice shivered; though she had never seen it before, she recognized it instinctively. It was ugly, naked hatred.

"When two men hate as those two hate!" she thought fearfully.

The instant had come, cast its sinister radiance and gone, with not so much as a hand raised or clenched. The old inscrutability was back in Joe Embry's eyes, the shades were down over the windows of his soul, his rejoinder to Steele's words came quietly.

"Rather it would seem, Mr. Steele," he said, lifting his hat to run a handkerchief across his brow, "that I am the discoverer. I find you here where, it appears, you have no business to be."

Steele's lungs swelled perceptibly to a deep breath. Slowly, as he expelled it, the rigidity of his frame relaxed.

"It's well to know when a rattlesnake is around," he said carelessly. "I wouldn't have thought, though, that you'd have quite had the nerve to go out of your way to look me up, Joe."

"Miss Corliss has ordered you off her property," returned Embry equably. "Since your latest game seems to be picking out a girl to persecute it is perhaps only natural that a friend of Miss Corliss' should go out of his way to look you up."

Steele's brows bunched up ominously, throwing his eyes into shadows.

"Out after big game, as usual, I see," he grunted. "You . . . Miss Corliss!"

He flung about, confronting her now, his eyes blazing.

"You take a tip from me and watch every little play Joe Embry makes," he cried warmly. "I don't know what he's up to this trip, but I do know him to the bottom of his crooked heart. He's a damned low down contemptible cur!"

These words to Beatrice Corliss, spoken in her presence, of a friend of hers! And yet the amazing thing is that for a breathless moment she was caught high upon a tide of uncertainty, swept away from all solid footing upon surety, dazed and bewildered. Only yesterday

had Joe Embry said to her: "Look out for that man; he is a crook." And now was that same man crying in a voice which went ringing through her ears, saying not behind Joe Embry's back but to his very face: "He's a damned low down contemptible cur!" And for that brief, immeasurably brief, fragment of time, so charged was the decrying voice with vibrant denunciation, Beatrice Corliss believed!

Even the calm self-mastery of a Joe Embry must feel to its very roots the shock of such accusation, even the face of a Joe Embry must flush hotly, his eyes cease once more to mask his thought. The man does not live into whose face there does not spring a line of crimson to the whip lash laid across it.

In a certain sense never had Beatrice Corliss lived to the full as she lived through these few vital seconds. Trained since early girlhood to cope with big situations, she had directed sortie and assault from the castellated citadel of a secure position, sending forth her emissaries to do battle for her, to come to close grips with what obstacles were in the paths of her success, herself unruffled by the life which pulsed and beat and clamoured and even raged at her bidding but always beyond the physical reach of her hand. From her vantage point, aloof and secure, she had but watched the marching forth of her serried ranks which were countless dollars and stubborn mercenaries, had but smiled as they went on and were lost in the obscurity of conflict, confidently awaiting their orderly return with word of victory for her. Nothing had been more characteristic of her method, of the Corliss method than this: she directed

largely and in general, leaving to her lieutenants all matters of detail. She had fancied that she was living life to the uttermost, that, though gloved, her hand was on its throat. And yet this morning she had been stirred vaguely by the mere merging of dawn into broad day, and now by the look in the eyes of two men, by the primal qualities in their voices. Swiftly the thought rushed upon her: These men put out no gloved hands to grip at the throat of life, but rather hands naked and hot and hard.

Both Hurley and Stanton, watching with frank interest, turned their eyes upon Embry. To Steele's sharp words there was but the one answer . . . if Joe Embry was the man that Hurley was or Stanton. Or Turk Wilson or Bill Rice. These two had risen, had come a little forward, their gaze, too, on Embry.

Beatrice, breathless, was for a moment held rigid and powerless by the new emotions which came to her from this new phase of life. One swift glance at the four faces of the men who watched, merely watched, told her that she had hopelessly failed to plumb the souls of these of her hirelings she thought she knew so well. They would stand by, just as they stood now, and watch death done, grave and hard-eyed and un-interfering; it was Steele's quarrel and Embry's, no other man's. They, to the last man of them, had utterly forgotten Beatrice Corliss. Not a tongue remembered to turn to the pale words: "There's a lady here."

Then abruptly she realized that they had not all stood thus an eternity as it had seemed, but the very brief time in which Joe Embry was actually springing

forward toward the few paces between him and Steele, yielding unreservedly to the stormy gust of rage and anger within him. And then Beatrice, once more a Corliss whose habit was that of dominance, called out sharply, her arm thrown out across Embry's breast:

"Stop! I will not have this. You have come this morning in my quarrel, not your own. That can wait. Stop, I tell you."

The thing which surprised Stanton and Hurley, Wilson and Rice, Steele himself and even Beatrice Corliss, was that Embry stopped. Though his face was still white, his old, habitual air of mastery, of self-mastery above all, returned to him. His hands fell to his sides, lax. Into his eyes, just now blazing with fury, came once more quick narrow-lidded speculation. There was even a hard smile as they rested briefly upon Beatrice's flushed face.

"I beg pardon, Miss Corliss," he said evenly. "As you say, any business between Steele and myself can wait."

"Yes, at least until my business with him is done," Beatrice hurried on, instinctively tightening her grasp upon the situation. She turned from him to Steele, the vague, troubled impressions of the past few seconds gone before the tangible fact that she had to do with an interloper who had defied her. "Mr. Steele, I have sent word to you that your presence upon my property is obnoxious. Will you go peaceably or must I have you thrown off?"

She marvelled at the man anew. For, even while she spoke, the hardness had faded from his face,

the shining mirth came back into his eyes. Since his "business" with Joe Embry was postponed it seemed that it was also forgotten.

"Your majesty," he said in his old, teasingly impudent way, "I have heard the royal mandate. The only trouble is that your imperial highness has gotten her signals mixed. Your two adorable little feet," and his twinkling glance at them made Beatrice desire to shift them though she stirred not the fraction of an inch, "are just now planted daintily upon Steele land. I offered to buy from you, as you will remember, just for the sake of the neighbourly good will that would go with the unnecessary transaction. But the land here, eighty acres of it, is mine. Absolutely."

Beatrice frowned. Again the man's positive statement of an absurdity sounded like most undeniable truth. But from her voice she kept all hint of uncertainty as she said:

"Just what do you mean?"

Steele chuckled in high amusement.

"Your father bought a lot of land here thirty years ago, didn't he?" he asked pleasantly. "Land wasn't worth much in here at that date; for a lot of this he paid about two dollars an acre, getting for the most part titles from men who had gotten theirs direct from Uncle Samuel. Now, it so happened that this particular bit of land on which you do me the honour of calling upon me, mostly rock and scrub brush and big timber that it was impracticable to get out and for which there was no use at that time, had no charm for the early homesteader. When your father bought up his big

blocks of land it either escaped his attention, or else appeared as a negligible trifle, that some eighty acres here at the fringe of his holdings still belonged to the government. Such things happen, my dear Miss Corliss. And old Mr. Steele, browsing around, got hep to the fact. So, having taken a fancy to the Goblet down there and the view up here, he negotiated with the government and bought these aforesaid eighty acres at a ridiculously low sum. That's the whole tale."

He stood smiling at her as though he fully expected her to draw from the situation as full a glee as it afforded him.

"I don't believe a word of it!" cried Beatrice.

"Be a good sport, Neighbour, and look cheerful," laughed Steele. "You can afford as well as any one I know to lose a few acres that don't belong to you and never did! Glance at this." It was a folded paper which he proffered and which she took quickly. "Also, have inquiries made in the proper quarters and you'll find that the deal has gone on record, all trig and shipshape. Oh, we're adjacent landholders, you and I, and you can't get away from it."

Almost from the first, making a sharp scrutiny of the proffered document unnecessary, she had known that he spoke the truth. And that her lawyer had spoken the truth when he had assured her that her titles were all right. It was simply that she had never held a title to this particular block of acreage. If she felt either mortification or embarrassment she showed neither as, very stiffly, she returned Steele's paper, folded nicely.

"Since," continued Steele, "I let you make a mistake, I am going to do you a favour. Turk Wilson tells me that you have fired him and Bill Rice for their failure to eject me. Now you will see that they couldn't do any more than they did, and it would be best to reconsider their discharge. They're two all-fired good men and you'd better take them back."

"I never take back a man whom I have let go," said Beatrice emphatically, glad that the subject had changed a little.

"You'd better," insisted Steele. "If you don't, I'll take the two of them on myself, and I don't like to start in our neighbourly dealings by robbing you of men like Bill and Turk. Honestly, I don't. I advise you—"

"When I want your advice, Mr. Steele, I'll gladly let you know," said Beatrice scornfully. "And as for the beginning of our neighbourly dealings, let me tell you something: If it takes every dollar I've got I'm going to drive you out of this country."

Keen, mirthful enjoyment danced high in his eyes.

"The Queen declares war!" he cried, as though the privileged herald of joyous news. "*Vive la reine!* Long live good Queen Bea! Why, you grey-eyed, dimpled little beauty, do you know it would be the biggest lark of the nineteenth century, to wage friendly warfare with you? And, just as I whispered to you yesterday: You come and play with old Bill Steele and he'll teach you how to get the real juice out of life!"

"Miss Corliss," offered Joe Embry, tactfully coming to the rescue as he saw Beatrice for a moment gasping

for an answer, "with your permission I should be glad to throw my fortunes in with yours for a little. I think that I, too, would enjoy watching the exit of Mr. Steele from our midst."

"Clever boy, Joe," admitted Steele, as he noted the promptness with which Embry twisted the situation to his own service. "A trifle crude, perhaps, but clever. Just the same," and again he turned to Beatrice, "you take another tip from me and keep your chief lieutenant out of my way if you don't want him all mussed up. I can stomach most things the good Lord lets trail slime over the earth, but I do gag on Joe Embry."

Then for the first time he went to shake hands with Ed Hurley. Beatrice and Embry went together back across the tableland and out of sight. Hurley, catching the look of Embry's averted face, muttered to his old friend:

"Look out for him, Billy. I've seen men look like that before."

And Steele, grinning broadly, responded:

"Quite like some little girl, isn't she? She's coming over to cook for me some day next week!"

CHAPTER IX

A TOAD IN THE FLOWER GARDEN

STRIFE, as a fledgling in its aerie, is no evil-looking bird. During the first few hours after passing from the shell out into the sunlight and blue air it is often enough as innocent appearing and winsome as any other little baby thing. In its initial flight, become already the ill-willed, double-headed, iron-beaked bird of prey, it requires but the flimsiest of wings, pinions more diaphanous than the dream-stuff of hopes. Here it appeared that one Billy Steele, a man of vast good humour, had merely taken that which was his own by right and by law, that which was not Beatrice Corliss', which never was hers, which she did not need. And already had strife essayed its pinions . . . because, more than for any other reason, Billy Steele was given to mirthful ways of dealing with life, because he had teased her and she was not accustomed to such treatment from a mere man.

Then, to be sure, there was Joe Embry. A man the keynote of whose character was mastery of self and consequently of others, who in the good old homely phrase was quick to note which side his own bread was buttered on. Such as Embry would not do otherwise than take swift stock of the situation, cast a keen eye forward seeking out incipient possibilities from the haze of futurity, bending opportunity to his purpose. And

so far as just the two men were concerned that purpose was never once in doubt.

"I am very much afraid, Miss Corliss," said Embry, as with Beatrice he went down through the boulders lining the bed of Thunder River, "that this fellow is going to make trouble for you. I even had what the gentlemen of the green table call a 'hunch' in that regard when I warned you against him yesterday. Soon enough, no doubt, he will be coming to you for a nice lump sum to pay him to crawl off the hem of your garment."

Beatrice did not answer. Embry, watching her, saw that her lips were compressed, that her eyes glowed. There was much of interrogation in Embry's look, interrogation of the sort that is determined to have its answers now or later.

"Just what his game is," continued Embry quietly, "I don't know. But I do know that he is an undesirable neighbour. Furthermore," and he made no attempt to soften his voice to the words, seeing in her attitude no need, "there is not and there never will be room enough in the same county for Steele and me."

"You two men hate each other," said Beatrice thoughtfully. "Why?"

"Why does a dog hate a cat?" replied Embry. "We're perhaps just two essentially different types, naturally antagonistic. And, though making no pretences at godliness, I draw the line at his sort of work."

Beatrice frowned. For a little they went on in silence. Finally she suggested:

"After all, I fail to see why I should care what he

does. He can't really injure me and I'll see that he has no further opportunities of annoying me."

"You said that if it took every cent you had —"

"And I will! Am I just some little country girl to be played with as he has sought to play with me? Am I meekly to suffer his impertinence? One way or another I'll drive him out of the country. I have the power to do it."

"Meaning pretty nearly unlimited wealth?" mused Embry.

"Just that," said Beatrice coolly.

"You won't."

"No. That will not be necessary. If you care to come with me to Camp Corliss and then to Summit City this morning you will begin to understand what I have in mind, Mr. Embry."

When they came to their horses they did not wait for Stanton and Hurley, but mounted and rode down among the big trees, hurrying back to the road and the waiting automobile. It was still early, but Beatrice meant to return to her guests well before noon and so informed Parker crisply as she and Embry, leaving their horses at the roadside for Stanton and Hurley to take charge of, stepped into the car.

Camp Corliss, a meagre settlement where a score of shanties housed mining crews and kindred workmen, stood in a little flat just out of sight of the main shaft of the new mine. Here Beatrice and Embry stopped but a moment, the big car trembling in its impatient pause before the door of the camp store. To the man

who came out in response to the drumming of the motor Beatrice spoke briefly.

“There is a man named Steele camping up by the Goblet. You are to sell him no supplies of any sort, to see so far as in your power that he gets no provisions or tools here. If so much as a tin of tobacco goes to him out of Camp Corliss you can ask for your time. That’s all. Drive on, Parker.”

From the camp, weaving in and out of cañons, densely wooded, murmurous with wilderness sounds, they mounted to the graded roadway leading to Summit City, climbed steeply through the further wooded slopes with nothing but the roadbed under them to give sign that they were not in the heart of a vast forest many miles from human habitation. Then, suddenly, having at last climbed to the crest of the ridge, they burst from the stronghold of the wild into as pretty, as spick and span a little hamlet as one could imagine outside an artist’s folio given over to picturesque and charming villages. Perched high above the surrounding broken country, each and every detail lingeringly and lovingly gone over by its maker before it leaped forth into actual birth from Sydney Perrier’s water-colours, Summit City was at once as pure a surprise here and as purely in harmony with its environment as any unexpected Alpine village. Beatrice’s eyes brightened as they always did at the first steep-roofed, leaded-windowed cottage.

Now, under the rolling wheels of the car was a smooth gravelled road, young firs in proper rows stood on either

side, and beyond them were clean sidewalks. The cottages, no two alike, all in harmony, were as bright and pretty as their prototypes in Perrier's watercolours, showing shutters which were not afraid to be frankly blue and pink and tender green, lifting gay red brick chimneys, hiding behind screens of foliage or standing out boldly to catch the golden sunshine. If it seemed some bright dream-town, such in truth it was, being Beatrice's dream come true. And, like other dream-stuff, it had its flaw, woven into its fabric. Beatrice, having smiled, frowned.

The car raced on along the almost level road, whizzed by the two-story, steep-roofed, balconied edifice which, bearing no sign over its open door, needed none to instruct the newcomer that here was to be had the hospitality of the community's "inn," made its brief journey between the rows of cottages and stopped in front of the store. This time, when a storekeeper came forth after seeing who it was at his door, Beatrice was slow in giving her order. For the frown had deepened in eyes which, passing on and beyond the last of Summit City's cottages, caught but a glimpse of the unpainted, rude wall of a building that was an interloper here, a leper among the clean. It was not five hundred yards from where she sat, it alone among buildings here bore a big painted sign, and though intervening branches concealed all but a mere hint of the walls, Beatrice remembered every sprawling, defiant letter placarding it as Summit City Saloon.

Every inch of land upon which Summit City itself stood belonged to Beatrice Corliss. She had bought

it that she might build a town here, a town to drowse in silence through the winter snows, to awake and stir and grow noisy with tourist merriment in the full springtime and warm summer and rich fall. Here was a hotel with an already wide famed cuisine, with clean linen and impeccable service, with telephone and telegraph at the disposal of the holidaymaking city man; here were cottages with every convenience and attraction; a store with well filled shelves and accommodating clerks; here was a dancing pavilion for the summer merry-makers. And down yonder, less than a mile away, was Corliss Lake, purchased at the time that this high tableland became hers, with blue and white row boats and launches and slim bodied, graceful canoes, with big trout to be had in season by the accomplished and fortunate fisherman. Then, everywhere about were racing streams for those who loved solitary rambles and the song of the water, woods where small game teemed and in which one might find the track of deer and even of the occasional bear and big mountain cat. And, on the slope at the far edge of the lake, the "Tent City" which had proven so popular last season.

Here was Beatrice Corliss Lord Mayor and board of aldermen. That this venture into the uncertain field of tourist interest had shown itself profitable was less satisfying to her than the fact that "she had made Summit City and it was hers." But one can not own all of the lands in the California Sierra, and not even Beatrice Corliss could expect to acquire unlimited ownership. Here or there, near or far, there must be an outer fringe to the greatest holding. Just beyond the

line of her property, squatted in ugly, misshapen, stubborn fashion, a veritable toad leering into her flower garden, was the Summit City Saloon, as secure from the flare of her wrath as though it had conducted its riotous and disorderly existence a score of miles away.

"Is that place open already?" Beatrice asked of the man who had come out of her store.

"Yes," he answered. "Opened last week. And I hear some pretty big games have been played, too."

She looked at him sharply. Long ago an order had gone forth that any man working for her who was seen so much as entering the Summit City Saloon was to be summarily discharged. The storekeeper returned her look innocently.

With no further reference to this thorn in her flesh, Beatrice repeated the instructions given in Camp Corliss, making emphatic that Steele was to be considered with hostility equal to that which she showed the unsightly gambling house. Then, having his instructions, Parker whizzed them back to the hotel. Here, again, a man came out, the clerk who was also the manager, a young, capable looking chap with a bright nod for his employer. He, in turn, was told that Bill Steele must find neither food nor bed under his roof. And, like most men taking their monthly wage from Beatrice Corliss, he knew how to obey orders.

"I might have telephoned this," said the girl to Embry, as the clerk went back to his office. "But I wanted to come over anyway. I am going to have more cottages put up; the hotel must have another wing. . . . Home, Parker."

"Just a minute, Parker," said Embry. "Miss Corliss, you wouldn't think me rude if I asked you to leave me here? I'd like to stay at the hotel a day or so. By that time my machine will have come and I'll run back to the ranch house for a call and to get my traps, if I may? Do you know," and for a moment one of his infrequent smiles brightened his sombre eyes, "I have another *hunch*. And I want to find out about it."

"Concerning that man Steele?" asked Beatrice.

He nodded.

"You have never found out who is the real owner and operator of this string of gambling houses through the mountains here, have you?" he asked significantly.

Beatrice started, her suspicions pricked by the insinuation. Again Embry nodded.

"It's like his work," he said quietly, stepping out to the sidewalk. "And it would explain his plan to accumulate further property in the neighbourhood. Also, perhaps, his desire to annoy you. You have made it rocky sledding for the saloon here and for one or two others, I believe."

"Mr. Embry," said Beatrice thoughtfully, "I have no sufficient claim upon you to expect you to put yourself out —"

"Need I remind you," cut in Embry, his tone cool but hard, "of Steele's words to me in your presence a little while ago? I am going to make him pay for them. As I told you then, I think that you and I have a common cause."

While Joe Embry had but suggested that Steele was the man financing the ill-famed string of composite

saloon, dance hall and gambling house which during the last year had lengthened through the neighbouring settlements, the seed fell in fertile soil. The girl, already angered with Steele, told herself that the work showed a hand like his; in her mind there was a telltale sameness of method in the way he himself camped on the rim of her lands at the Goblet, just beyond her vengeance, and the way in which the Summit City Saloon, defiant and ugly, squatted yonder in plain sight but beyond her jurisdiction. She believed that Joe Embry was right, for the large reason that she was a little more than willing to believe it. . . . She beckoned to Sawyer, the hotel clerk.

"Mr. Embry is my guest," she explained, as he came out again. "You are to remember that and all that it implies." She put out her hand to Embry, smiled and repeated, "Home, Parker."

Joe Embry's eyes, as he watched her go, were filled with low lidded speculation. Then, abruptly, he turned to Sawyer.

"What's the name of the man running the Summit City Saloon?" he asked.

"Truitt," answered Sawyer. "He's called Flash Truitt more than anything else, I believe."

"Hm," said Embry. "Friend of this man Steele, isn't he?"

"Why, I don't know," admitted Sawyer cheerfully. "I don't know either of the gentlemen personally." His eyes twinkled as he concluded. "And, being a wise little boy with my best job, the chances are I am not likely to know them very well."

"Truitt would probably be at his place now?"

"I'd imagine so."

"I think," mused Embry, taking out a large cigar and giving his attention to the nice cutting of the end, "that I'll stroll over and have a word with him."

Sawyer, being as he put it a wise little boy with due appreciation of his job, merely lifted his eyebrows involuntarily. But within his heart he was asking himself what Beatrice Corliss' guest had to do with Flash Truitt of the Summit City Saloon and gambling house. A question which it would be long before Sawyer could answer.

CHAPTER X

THREE MEN CALL FROM THE LITTLE GIANT

BILL STEELE, losing himself in the big forests, found life infinitely pleasant. Whatever business project had brought him here was shelved for the first few glorious days, shoved out of mind and replaced by each day's plan for enjoyment. With rifle on shoulder, line and hook and fly in his pocket and hat band, a small roll on his shoulders carrying both bed and larder, he left Turk Wilson and Bill Rice at the Goblet and plunged into the deepest of the south woods. The two men discharged by Beatrice Corliss were content to take Steele's wage, and as he nodded his "So long," their axes sent bright, white chips after him to mark the site of the cabin-to-be. It was while Beatrice and Embry were speeding on to Camp Corliss and Summit City that Steele turned southward into the North Fork of Long Cañon country.

Here was a land where he need fear no warning against trespassing, a land which still belonged to the wild because it was virtually inaccessible save to a man on foot, where seldom cattle were pushed because of an abundance of brush and a scarcity of readily reaped grass, where not yet, thank God, had the sheepman come. Yet there was a good trail and Steele followed it for several hours, having a desire for the companion-

THREE MEN CALL

able silences of French Meadows, a trail made maintained by that silent, thoughtful eyed, capable son of the woods who is the California forest ranger. Here and there was the sign of his passing, the slanting bite of his axe blade blazing the way, infrequently the cloth notice with its black letters warning the hunter whose happy feet came herewards to be careful with his fires. For when Steele came to French Meadows he would be in the heart of one of the national forest preserves.

Fifteen or eighteen miles did Steele tramp that day. Three times in the forenoon his hand tightened hard on the grip of his rifle, the automatic response to the sight of a deer, and each time did he lower his gun without firing, a smile in his eyes. He did not need the meat and he found that he was in no mood for slaughter. So filled with the pulsing joy of life himself, he was without wish to drain the red flow from the throat of a single one of his fellow woodland beings.

At noon he idled over a cold lunch and a lingering pipe, lying for an hour flat on his back, staring up through the still, wide flung arms of the forest, listening to the quiet voices which make the deep silences what they are. At dusk, having crossed many a ridge and narrow cañon, he was in the upper end of French Meadows, with glooming, cliff sided mountains about him and French Creek racing by him eager for its long journey to the sea.

He cut many fir boughs with his belt hatchet, making his bed wide and thick and soft and warm. He made his fire and in the hush of the evening went whis-

JOYOUS TROUBLE MAKER

ay about his dinner-getting. Then, stretched upon his blankets, he watched the first stars come out, and watching them went to sleep.

It was a full week, perhaps longer, before he so much as thought of returning to his eighty acres. He didn't count the days as they fled by, all golden sunshine and blue nights, any more than he sought to count the butterflies in the tiny meadows, or the cliffs or trees or stars. Never had he been more richly content than now; he didn't plan for the future, he didn't even think a great deal. He just emulated the environment into which he had come, loafed through the woods, lay stretched out luxuriously half in sun and half in shadow, ate and slept and lived quietly. He shot what game he needed, caught the fish which he required and grew every day browner, clearer eyed, more thankful that he had gone broke down in Mexico and had had this nook of the world waiting for him.

When his thoughts did go back along the trail which had brought him here they either clung brightly to Beatrice Corliss who, he admitted, interested him, darkly to Joe Embry whom he distrusted, or to Bill Rice and Turk who had his commands. He had emptied his pockets of his small pile of gold and silver into Bill Rice's hard palm, instructing him to buy what provisions and tools he and Turk required. He supposed that his men had lost no time in packing in a much needed supply, that they had now bacon and beans and flour, hammers, nails and saws, all in sufficient plenty, all purchased from the store at Camp Corliss or in Summit City. Toward the end of his idle

sojourn in French Meadows he began to look forward with keen appetite to becoming acquainted with certain delicacies which he knew Rice and Turk would have considered necessities, tins of tomatoes and fruit, prunes and perchance a few cans of tamales and a bottle of beer. Such are the dreamings which draw men back from the trail and to the door of civilization. He even found himself longing for an impossible cup of fresh milk. When he awoke one morning with a craving for something to read, be it only an old newspaper, he recognized the summons and, having breakfasted, made into an exceedingly small package what provisions remained to him, rolled his bedding, took up his rifle and turned back toward the Goblet.

"It's been paradise for a week," was his way of regarding the matter. "No man can stand heaven for any longer than that. Now, maybe, we'll get a chance at the old thing."

Because in the woods it is the pleasant thing to go by one trail and return by another, Steele having come to a certain remembered forking of the ways turned off to the left, meaning to come back to the Goblet from the west and above, whereas he had left it going downstream and toward the east. The way he chose now was a mile or two longer, a little harder, but he had all day to devote to the handful of miles and still craved new wide spreading panoramas from new ridges. So, pure chance and a man's whim shaping the event, it came about that he did a very fortunate thing.

It was slow going at best and therefore the afternoon was well advanced when Steele came up over the

ridge whence he could look down into the upper waters of Thunder River. Now, in gala mood, fancying a tin platter heaped high with good things to eat, his big voice booming out in one of his melodious but not entirely tuneful songs, he hurried on down the steep trail, only Thunder River's roar of sound capable of deadening news of his approach. Singing he came to the edge of his own little stretch of tableland, his eager eyes expecting a cabin well along towards completion. And what he saw was the well remembered plateau just as he had left it, with never a sign or hint of a cabin. He stopped suddenly, his eyes frowning.

The first suspicion was that Turk and Rice, going for supplies, had got drunk and stayed drunk, reckless with the little gold and silver he had given into their keeping. But he shook his head; they might get drunk, but he didn't believe they would do it on his money. It wasn't like Rice; he didn't believe that Turk was that sort, either. Then, catching a glimpse of two men through the trees, he went on with big strides, hot words forming to his tongue.

One of the men was Turk. He was squatting with his back to a tree, his face turned toward Steele. He had seen Steele, but gave no sign save for a tell-no-*tales* grin which came slowly to his heavy features. But the other man was not Rice; Steele was only a score of steps away, still advancing swiftly, when the fellow turned and Steele saw a big, lumbering, shaggy chap, all mouth and nose and wide ears, a rough looking customer if the mountains ever harboured one.

"Look out for him, Steele!" shouted Turk suddenly.
"I'm all tied up."

In an instant Steele was in possession of the incredible fact that Turk's hands were bound with a bit of rope behind him, that another rope, run about his ankles, held him powerless. And, in the same flash, that the look of surprise upon the face of Turk's captor had changed swiftly to one of determination, that the big fellow had whirled and was running toward a tree against which an old rifle rested. . . .

"At him, Steele!" yelled Turk, straining at his ropes until his fiery complexion grew an ugly purple.
"Don't let him get his gun!"

Steele's pack slipped from his back, falling behind him as he sprang forward. His own rifle was in his hands, clutched hard, but he had no desire of using it, being, as Bill Rice had said of him, a man who never turned his back on a fight, but one who had never yet been in the situation from which he could not free himself with his hands. As Turk's captor whipped up his gun Steele was upon him; as Turk, still straining frantically, half whimpered: "Oh, hell. He'll get the drop on you!" Steele shifted his own rifle to his left hand and struck out with his right. A hard fisted blow, driven with all of the force and all of the weight of Bill Steele, landing fair and square in another man's face; a blow to which there was but the one answer, promptly given: the rugged form of the newcomer upon Steele's land crumpled and fell to lie still, half stunned.

Steele, his eyes blazing, wheeled upon Turk.

"What in the name of idiocy does this mean?" he cried wonderingly. "Who is he? What the devil is he up to? Where's Rice?"

Turk, who in his struggle with his bonds had fallen forward, wriggled over and got his back again to his tree. The eyes turned upon his employer were eyes to measure a man, taking careful stock of him.

"I didn't think you could do it, Steele," he remarked gravely. "Not that-away, with your hands, jus' one wallop. Why, that's Johnnie Thorp, that's who it is!"

"Who's he?" demanded Steele curtly.

"He's the secon' best scrapper this side of hell," grunted Turk. "He figgered he was the firs' until jus' now, I reckon. Now, if you'll grab these ropes off'n me, I'll go slap 'em on him. . . . *Look out!*"

Johnnie Thorp, enraged, weak from the blow in his face, but not yet accounting himself beaten, was on his knees, his hands groping for the rifle in the grass. Steele swept it away from his clutching fingers, thrusting the man back.

"Damn you," muttered Thorp.

"A man like you, from the looks of you," returned Steele in hot contempt, "ought to be big enough to depend on his hands and leave this sort of sneaking gun play to the indoor sports. Now, stand up if you like and get your wind and I'll knock the eternal daylight out of you."

"Don't you do it, Steele!" warned Turk eagerly. "They'll get you if you do. There's two more of 'em, down trail a bit, waitin' for you to come in that away. Turn me loose, can't you?"

"And Rice?" demanded Steele sharply. "Have they got him, too?"

"No," said Turk. "They ain't. But if you don't hurry up —"

Thorp had turned and was making off downstream. Steele, now that Turk's information put a new look upon matters, called to him sharply:

"None of that, Thorp. Come back here or I'll just naturally have to blow off that left hind leg of yours. I mean it, old man."

Thorp, turning to see the look in Steele's eyes, cursed but came back. It was Turk's own hands which, a moment later, ran a rope tight about Thorp's big wrists and thick ankles.

"Which is one of the happies' jobs I ever done," admitted Turk cheerfully. "Now, Steele, let's go get them other fresh guys."

Steele noted that Turk walked with a bad limp, further that his face was bruised and cut.

"The three of them jump you, Turk?" he asked quietly.

"Yep," answered Turk. "Let's go get 'em, Bill."

"And Rice?"

"Gone for grub an' stuff. Before they showed a-tall."

With a glance backward at the prone and cursing Johnnie Thorp they left him, Turk carrying Thorp's old rifle. Seeing the look in Turk's eyes Steele said firmly:

"I rather think this is my scrap by rights, Turk. Anyway I won't have any shooting that isn't necessary.

I'd almost rather take a good two fisted licking than kill some poor devil."

"Huh!" grunted Turk, staring at him. "You haven't got mauled yet today by them guys, though."

As they went on down through the boulders, it appeared that Turk had had an ankle badly turned in the fight with Johnnie Thorp and his two companions, and now limping his best, he fell behind the eager Steele.

"Wait, can't you?" he expostulated over and over. "Oh, damn it, don't be a hawg, Steele. I got a right to be in on this from the jump."

"You've had more than your share already," grinned Steele over his shoulder.

The brief struggle with the man who now lay cursing on the plateau behind him, coming all unexpectedly, had set his blood racing, his pulses hammering. Not in anger . . . there had been scant time for anger and he had never so much as laid eyes upon the bulk of Johnnie Thorp before . . . but impelled by the sheer force of immediate necessity, had he driven his fist into a man's face. Now, still not in anger, but in wonderment and with rising, solidifying determination in every heart beat, he strode on to demand a reckoning of the two men who waited for him, facing the other way in the lower trail. His rifle he carried loosely in his hand, trusting that if he were forced to use it at all it might be as a club merely. At the moment the emotion riding him was purely pleasurable; in the man like Bill Steele there lives on to the last the boy who loves a fair fight.

On the rim of the little meadow where his freed horse now browsed Steele saw them. Two men, one stretched

out on the ground, leaning on his elbow, the other humped over where he sat on a rock, their eyes turned the other way, looking toward the trail which led southward and to French Meadows. Steele paused, waiting for Turk.

"See them?" he asked quietly. "Got a camp here, have they?"

"Been here two nights," returned Turk, his eyes with Steele's on the men down below. "Had me tied up since las' night. We can get the drop on 'em from here, Steele, make 'em throw up their hands an'—"

"And be forced to let them go or drop them when they start to make a break for it," cut in Steele. "Have they got any side arms, Turk?"

"Nope. Jus' one rifle, besides this'n."

"And that's leaning against a tree over there," said Steele, pointing. "They're mighty dead sure sort of cusses, figuring a man has got to travel back the same trail he went out on. Come ahead, Turk, and if you don't fall down, the river will cover any noise we make."

Slipping among trees and boulders, they drew nearer. The two men were talking, but the sound of their voices did not carry to Steele and Turk until they were within a score of paces of the meadow's edge. Steele, with a wink at Turk which set that individual staring again, put his rifle down quietly and nodded to Turk to do the same. One of the two men turned. . . .

There was a startled cry as the fellow lying down whipped to his feet and stared, doubly taken aback at seeing Turk freed and lumbering forward and witnessing the approach of a man who must be Steele, but who

came from the west when he should come from the southeast. It was just that little shock of surprise, bringing with it a brief moment of hesitation, that decided a matter of some moment there in the woods that pleasant afternoon. The other man upon the rock had sprung to his feet at his companion's cry and Steele saw that the two of them, like Johnnie Thorp, were big, man-sized men, the sort to be chosen for just such work as had brought them here. Then, Turk with a little gurgling, throaty curse, Steele with the joyous whoop of some battle waging wild man, the two of them had leaped forward, their eager hands out, rushing in between their visitors and the lone rifle. And, the moment of hesitation over, they were met body to body, unflinchingly, by men who knew how to fight and were not afraid.

Turk, his wounded ankle failing him, stumbled just as his knotted fist sought a flushed, bearded face, pitched forward and went down with another knotted fist driving at his jaw and striking him high on the forehead. Steele saw this, saw that Turk had rolled over and grasped with both hands the knees of the man above him, seeking at once to draw himself up and the other down. Then, for a little, Steele saw nothing in all the wide world but that other man who had sprung forward to meet his onrush.

A pretty even match in most things were Bill Steele and Tom Hardy, two men who, physically, might have been twin brothers, both big and hard and fearless and quick, both long of arm, steady of eye, deep breasted. From the moment that Turk Wilson's great arms tight-

ened about the legs of his antagonist, drawing him relentlessly down, there was no doubt of the outcome there. For in Turk's wide shouldered, squat, ungainly form there was twice the endurance and power that was to be met in the man who beat and hammered at him, in Turk's soul there was room for two emotions only, rage and confidence. But Steele and Tom Hardy, meeting squarely, both on their feet, both glimpsing a little of what the next few moments might offer, the issue was in doubt until the end. Which came swiftly enough, even so.

For frequently it chances that the battle royal between two mighty belligerents is sooner done with than the stand-off and spar of lesser forces. A pair of chipmunks may quarrel all day while the grapple of two mountain cats must perforce find a quicker conclusion. The very force with which Steele and Tom Hardy met, the shock of their big panting bodies, precluded thought of a long drawn issue.

Smite, be smitten and smite back again, such is the way that men know how to fight in the land about Hell's Goblet. Strike, strike hard, ignoring all the subtle arts of artificial fistic encounter, for a blow on the cheek return a blow to the jaw, for a cut and bleeding mouth pay back in the coin of a bruised and battered eye, seeking always and always the one consummation of putting the other man down, down to stay.

Turk Wilson's long arms had passed upward along a man's legs, found his thighs, at last wrapped about a heaving body. The two were down, had rolled out into the meadow ten feet away, where they threshed

about in a strange sort of silence. Only the beating of arms and legs, the hammering of hard fists, to tell that the two writhing bodies were endowed with purpose and grim earnestness. Then, at last, there was Turk Wilson squatting in his old familiar way, this time on top of a man who lay still under Turk's big, hard hands, while Turk's red rimmed eyes sought Steele.

"Go to it, Bill," cried Turk encouragingly. "I got ol' Pete all sewed up fine. You get Tom now . . ."

Steele, under a terrific blow, had gone reeling backward, down the slope, saved from falling only by the tree whose trunk his labouring shoulders struck. And Steele, with a twisted sort of laugh from battered lips, was shouting:

"Good shot, old boy. Nearly got me that trip!"

Turk tightened his grip warningly upon the throat under him.

"Lay still, can't you, Pete?" he demanded angrily. "Look at that man Steele! He's laughin'! Laughin', I tell you. An' . . . Attaboy! Attaboy, Bill! Give him hell!"

For Tom Hardy had leaped forward, charging down hill upon Steele, and Steele had sprung to one side and whipped about and struck out and in the twinkling of an eye Hardy was lower down on the slope, Steele above and, in turn, charging downward. And while Turk chuckled and grasped Pete's throat, urging him to watch, oblivious of the fact that all that Pete could see was the insect life in the grass, the fight on the slope was ended. For Steele, seeing his chance, had hurled his body through the air upon Tom Hardy's,

striking him both in bulging chest and flushed face, throwing him backward to stagger and trip and fall prone, heavily. And, in that dizzy moment before he could rise, Steele was upon him, Steele's hands, like Turk's, commanding peace.

"We're not doing this just for fun, are we?" panted Steele, though not yet had all trace of good humour gone from his face. "Lie still, or I'll just have to put you out with one smash on the jaw."

"Damn it," grunted Tom Hardy. But with aching head, dizzy brain and a view of what stood in Steele's eyes, he lay still.

"Which," came Turk Wilson's voice thoughtfully, "is puttin' over the firs' trick on the Young Queen! Huh, Steele? Say, Pete, will you lay still long enough so's I can bite off a chaw tobacco?"

"What do you mean by that, Turk?" demanded Steele sharply. For, given until now little enough time for reflection, he had not so much as thought of Beatrice Corliss.

"Sure," said Turk. "Whoa, Pete! Ain't you got no sense a-tall? Have I got to twis' your tail any more to make you rec'lec' who's ridin' you? You see," and it became evident that he was again addressing his employer, "Tom Hardy, what you're settin' on his wish bone, an' Pete Olsen what I'm breakin' in, an' ol' Johnnie Thorp, is all three Little Giant men, *her* men."

CHAPTER XI

A NEW KIND OF POLE TEAM

STEELE'S mood changed slowly. Pondering Turk's words, he came to his decision. War with the Corliss interests he had expected; he had even looked forward expectantly to a mirthful rivalry. But this sort of thing he had not looked for; it smacked of the handiwork of Joe Embry, it hinted that Joe Embry was whispering suggestions in Beatrice's ear, that she was following them.

"There's going to be no more monkey business," he said sharply. "You two men get that under your skulls."

He knew that the fight had not all gone out of Tom Hardy, that in another moment if he was content to let the man rest under his hands the struggle would have to be resumed. And now, in an altered mood, he wanted the end of it. With a suddenness which brought no warning to Hardy, nor yet to the watchful Turk Wilson, he sprang to his feet, ran back a dozen steps up the slope and snatched up the nearest rifle. As he did so Tom Hardy, guessing his purpose when it was too late, lumbered to his feet only to find a rifle barrel covering him.

"Stand still there, Hardy," warned Steele briefly. "I'm not going to shoot to kill, since it isn't necessary."

But I'll break a leg for you just the minute you forget to do what you're told."

"Fight fair, can't you?" growled Hardy.

"Do you call it fair fighting," demanded Steele coolly, "when three of you put up a game to pick us off one at the time? Wait for Bill Rice to get out of the way, then nab Turk and then lay for me! I've given you an even break until now, and you know it. Now you do what you are told and do it lively, or get a rifle ball in the leg. It's up to you."

"That's talkin', Bill," commented Turk in full endorsement. "We've licked 'em once already an' that's enough for one day. Lay still, can't you, Pete?"

"Let him go, Turk," commanded Steele, backing off another pace or two, to have ample room for the quick shifting of aim. "I can cover the two of them now. Come here."

Turk rose and came forward. Pete sat up, grunted, got heavily to his feet, his eyes filled with question, still reminiscent of rage.

"There's some rope over there by their blankets," continued Steele, watchful of the slightest movement made by either of the two Little Giant men.

Turk, his back to his recent foemen, winked largely into Steele's face, while saying gravely:

"Sure. Hang 'em the same's we did pore ol' Johnnie Thorp. I hate to do it, but . . ."

"Get the rope," cut in Steele tersely. "Know how to tie a man's hands so he can't get them loose?"

"Do I?" grinned Turk. "Watch me."

He separated a thick rope into its twisted strands,

employed his monster, tobacco stained knife to cut them into proper lengths, and whistling his adored air from "Il Trovatore," approached Tom Hardy. For an instant Steele feared that he would have to keep his promise and put a hole in the man's leg. But Hardy, seeing the look in Steele's eyes, gave over cursing and let Turk bind his wrists behind him.

"I'll get you some day for this, Turk," was all that he said.

Turk sighed and shook his head, remarked: "That's what they all say, Tom; it ain't no ways original," and resumed "Il Trovatore."

"Tie his feet, too?" he asked of Steele.

"No; he'll need them," was the blunt rejoinder. "Truss up your other friend."

There was a considerable show of frank pleasure in Turk's prompt obedience. Then he turned for further orders.

"Take the other rifle and go get Johnnie Thorp," said Steele. "Or if your ankle hurts you. . . . Here, you ride herd on these two boys and I'll bring in Johnnie."

He passed his rifle to Turk who sat down with it across his knees, making himself comfortable upon a rock and at last reaching for his slab of tobacco. Steele, taking up the other gun, disappeared among the trees, returning presently with Thorp marching sullenly in front of him.

"You three gentlemen," he said, as Thorp took his place between his glowering companions, "have a nice

long walk ahead of you. If you want to get home before dark you'll have to step lively."

"They'll get themselves loose, Bill," remarked Turk, who had had time to think. "One'll ontie the other with his teeth an' mos' likely, bein' hard headed gents, they'll come right back."

"Since I've got something else to do besides play tag with them," grunted Steele, "they might as well know that if they come back looking for trouble they'll get it hot out of a rifle barrel. If your outfit is looking for that kind of a fight all you've got to do is come after it. As for untying one another . . . I'd thought of that. Keep your eye on the three of them, Turk."

He set down his gun, unsnapped his belt hatchet, and stepped into the nearest clump of young firs. It was short work to lop down a slender thirty-foot-high tree, and rudely trim it of branches. Turk, allowed to give but a questioning glance sidewise, was moved to wonder. But he understood in a moment and testified his delight with a gurgle of mirth.

"Goin' home tandem!" he chuckled into Pete Olsen's empurpled face. "Didn't know when I was breakin' you to ride that we was figgerin' on workin' you in harness too, did you, Pete? Haw!"

For the rest was simplicity itself. First under Johnnie Thorp's right arm was the long pole slipped until half of its length had passed by him. Then Steele's own fingers made Thorp's wrist fast to the sapling with a bit of rope, so that he might reach neither the heavy end in front of him nor the lopped off end

behind him. Though Pete Olsen cursed mightily and even offered physical opposition, the trick was repeated with him, so that he was bound fast to one end of the fir. In stubborn silence, though with a face gone a burning red, Tom Hardy allowed himself to be tied to his end of the pole. Through the whole procedure Turk Wilson on his rock never ceased swaying back and forth in a paroxysm of delight. From that hour on, so long as he lived, he would give unstintedly of his admiration to Bill Steele. And of his loyalty.

"Just a minute, boys," grinned Steele, whose good humour had come back with an episode which appealed to it. "Turk and I have no use for your baggage and no wish to steal it. Roll their blankets, Turk."

So blankets were rolled, strapped to the pole between the harnessed men, made into two packs, a rifle in the heart of each. And then at last did Steele say lightly:

"On your way, boys, if you want to get in before dark."

"Else a wil' cat might eat you up!" suggested Turk gravely. "You look that helpless."

And, with no desire to prolong the moment, Pete Olsen and Johnnie Thorp and Tom Hardy, their faces flaming, took up their grotesque way down among the big trees, headed back toward the Little Giant mine.

"Since they ain't over comfortable that away," mused the ecstatic Turk, "they'll travel right along, won't they? An' when they come trapsin' into camp like that, an' the boys get a sight of them. . . . Lord, Lordy, Bill Steele! When them three gents come again there's goin' to be murder!"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Bill Steele grimly. "And now tell me, Turk: what's the reason you and Rice have done nothing while I was away? And what's the meaning of Rice being gone so long now?"

Turk explained as they trudged back to the plateau and had the privilege of seeing Steele's eyebrows go up in astonishment. The day Steele had left them Rice had gone into Camp Corliss for a little more generous lay-out of provisions and some nails and tools. He had learned that nothing was to be had there by Bill Steele or any man taking Steele's wage. He had gone on into Summit City and had had the information repeated. He had been hungry and couldn't get a meal at the hotel or at the little chop house. He had come back at last to spend the night in camp and to consult with his friend. The next morning he had left again, planning to go on through Summit City and to the nearest town beyond, which was Temple Junction, a fifty mile distant railroad town. And it was likely, said Turk, that he'd have to walk unless he waited for the stage which ran at this time of year only twice a week.

"Why didn't he take my horse?" asked Steele.

Turk grinned.

"Scared," he chuckled. "Me an' Bill Rice ain't buckeroos an' never was. I'd rather ride a cyclone than that devil eyed cayuse of yourn. So'd Bill."

That night Steele was forced to dine on trout again. They were down to the last potato, the last handful of beans. Flapjack flour all gone; only a few spoonfuls of sugar left; hardly greater an amount of coffee. . . .

"Here's hopin'," sighed Turk thoughtfully, "that Bill don't get drunk in Temple Junction an' forget to come back real soon."

And he looked almost hurt at Steele's answer, a sudden roar of laughter. For again Steele saw that which was hidden to Turk's eyes . . . the humour of the situation.



CHAPTER XII

A SUMMONS FROM KING BILL OF HELL'S GOBLET

THUNDER RIVER ranch house, having echoed with much merry making during the past ten days, now drowsed comfortably upon the iron flank of the mountain, its wide doors closed softly behind the last of the departing guests. Beatrice Corliss had seen her friends go with eyes which she knew were not properly regretful. She had been gay to match their gaiety, she had entertained them after the proverbial open handed Corliss manner, she had borne in upon their eager minds the glittering fact that even "here in the wilderness, apart from their world," a talented and lavish hostess had at her disposal many a novel thrill to give them. Old tales of the sparkle and splendour of Corliss hospitality were to be added to by these folk trooping back to the whirl of the city. They would come again, oh, at any time that Beatrice would have them; perhaps swept hitherwards by the surging summer tide.

But, in going from Beatrice's house, they went swiftly from her thought. She had much to do and was impatient to be doing. So impatient, in fact, that even while giving herself up as hostess during afternoons and evenings, she had reserved both keen interest and energy for the work ahead. During these few days she had formed a new habit, that of rising in the crisp

early morning while her guests slept, riding out behind Parker through the lifting, thinning shadows or sitting in her office with a cup of coffee at one elbow and her telephone at the other.

Her heart was in Summit City. 'Already new lumber was being hauled up the mountain road from the nearest logging camp, foundations being laid for a dozen picturesque cottages, an ample wing increasing both space and charm of her "inn." But she wanted to be "in it all"; to spend half of a day in her own town, to watch, to superintend, to have in her nostrils the smell of fresh cut pine. And now she could do as she wished. It was with a long sigh that she waved the two automobiles out of sight.

"I must be getting old," she told herself brightly. "All that I want is peace and quiet and to get things done! That's what's the matter with you, Beatrice Corliss! You'd rather build a house than go to a ball."

Joe Embry she had not seen since that day when she had left him in Summit City. He had telephoned several times, to say indefinitely once that he was "just looking around" for an investment; another time to tell her that he had looked up the man Flash Truitt of the obnoxious gambling house and was rather confident that the fellow was but an agent for Steele; another time or two "just to be sociable, dear lady." He thought so highly of her good sense in having so splendid a mountain home and in living at it the bigger part of the time, that he was thinking very seriously of emulating her and building somewhere within striking distance of Summit City.

Of Bill Steele, the impudent, of whom she had heard nothing directly for some days, Beatrice was growing in the way of being forgetful, so filled was her mind with other matters. Two occurrences, however, were to recall him to her vividly.

The first was the arrival of Joe Embry at the ranch house the morning after her friends had gone, bringing news.

"I would have hailed a lesser matter than this eagerly as a good and sufficient excuse for seeing you again," he said, by way of greeting. "It's going to be hard, when I've got a home here somewhere, not to be running in on you all the time."

In spite of her and, so she told herself, without good and sufficient excuse, Beatrice coloured warmly under Embry's eyes. In all the days she had known him he had never come quite so close, whether by word of mouth or steady look, to the border line of love-making.

"What is it" she asked quickly, conscious that he had noted the slight colour rising in her cheeks and angry with herself for it.

"It's Steele again," he told her, shifting his look to his hands which today seemed unusually white and sensitive. "It seems that he and one of his men, the fellow Turk Wilson you discharged recently, have been fighting with three of your men."

Beatrice looked up sharply, wonderingly.

"Tell me about it," she said eagerly. Embry smiled.

"It happened yesterday," he said easily. "By now I imagine news of it has spread all over the country. And I frankly wish that it had not gained so much

publicity; it is rather likely to make our side of the affair appear . . . well, ridiculous."

"Tell me," she said again. It isn't a pleasant thing to be made to appear ridiculous . . . that seemed to be that man Steele's forte . . .

"Three of your men from the Little Giant mine," continued Embry, "through a somewhat distorted sense of loyalty—I have talked with them all—visited Steele at the Goblet. They had learned that he had displeased you, further that he had both defied you and laughed at you. More than that, it seems that he had done some careless talking, using your name in a way that these three men who take your wage could not stand for."

"Go on," said Beatrice in a strangely quiet voice as Embry paused briefly.

"They went to Steele and in the only way such men know, sought to teach him a lesson. The result was . . . disastrous. He and Wilson were too much for the three of them, getting the drop on them with their rifles, I imagine. At any rate, the three Little Giant men came back into camp last night with their hands tied behind them and hitched to a long pole so that they could not untie one another, and the men at the mine are laughing about it yet."

Beatrice's face was flaming.

"My men have no business doing a thing like that without orders from me!"

"Since they are men," interceded Embry gravely, "are we really to blame them? They look upon you, Miss Corliss, as loyal peasants may look upon their

queen. They have erred, yes; but in what a cause! I trust that, whatever you may decide to do, you will not deal with them harshly."

Nor, in the end, did she. She got their names from Embry, called up Hurley and had the man who appeared to be their leader, Johnnie Thorp, sent immediately to the ranch house, where she interviewed him in her office. Thorp, overcome by the elegance into which he came for the first time in a life of the rough conveniences of camp, shifted and blushed and choked over his words and altogether put in a memorably uncomfortable fifteen minutes. But, having already talked with Joe Embry, his report was in all essentials like Embry's, and in the end he left his employer with a secret grin in his eyes. He had been both reprimanded and thanked. And in the future he was to be a shade less impetuous and arduous in the service of the young lady upon whom he was supposed to look with peasant adoration. On his way down the graded road he took from his overalls a twenty-dollar gold piece, glanced at it brightly with one eye, the other being closed in a wink, and told himself that, even as matters stood, it was easy money and Embry was a good scout. Besides, there would be another chance at Bill Steele; Joe Embry had predicted, then promised as much.

"An' besides that," muttered Thorp to himself, "easy money always was lucky money with me; I'll double this tonight at Truitt's. See if I don't."

The second reminder of Bill Steele came to Beatrice a few days later; not that it was needed now, for she

told herself that if she lived to be a hundred she would never forget the man's impudence or the indignities he had heaped upon her. Steele's "Pole Team" had created widespread interest and had elicited much rude laughter; that that laughter was directed at the three men who had gone forth boastfully and come back helplessly and not at herself did not suggest itself to her. She knew that men talked of it in mine and logging camp and on the range, that news of it went mile after mile up and down, that a merry account of the whole episode appeared in both the *White Rock Sentinel* and the *Junction Independent*, eliciting humorous editorial comment in the latter, employing her name in both. So when word came to her at last, direct from Steele himself, she was near the verge of hot tears of exasperation.

"To Her Imperial Majesty, Trixie the Great," he wrote in big generous letters reminiscent of the man himself. "From her fellow Monarch, King Bill of Hell's Goblet. Greetings. Let the bells ring in honour of an occasion of tremendous importance in the lives and friendships of the aforementioned royal personages. Let us commemorate with joy and song the keeping of the promise made by the August Bill. The cabin is done! Houp-la, your majesty.

"Your own promise you will keep because noblesse oblige and the Queen, especially when she is the Good Queen Bea, cannot lie. *Ave atque vale.*

"BILL."

Not only the royal message, but envelope as well, torn across angrily went to the floor to be ground by a savage little high heel.

"The . . . the . . . the fool!" she gasped. "The

great big fool! I'd sooner visit a pig in a pig pen. I . . . I . . . Oh, how I hate you, Bill Steele!"

"Your own promise you will keep because noblesse oblige and the Queen, especially when she is the Good Queen Bea, cannot lie."

The words, torn across and not to be read upon the crumpled paper, stood out as though in burning red letters in her mind. He had made her a promise at which she had scoffed, branding it ridiculous and absurd. She in turn had made another, if not meaning to keep it, then simply for the reason that she had not looked to him to keep his. But he had done so . . . and now, in his hateful way, reminded her of it.

"I'd see you dead before I lowered myself to come to you and . . . and cook for you!" she cried passionately, for the instant seeming actually to see the grinning face of Bill Steele.

And then suddenly, because she was Beatrice Corliss whose word men accepted out in the world of affairs as readily as they accepted her signature on paper, her face burning, her bosom grown tumultuous, she whirled and went straight through the house, from the one end where her office was to the other end where was the kitchen. The cook, who could scarcely have been more startled if Beatrice had been a ghost or a boa constrictor or any other sort of unaccustomed visitant here, looked at her with wide eyes. Eyes which widened further as Beatrice gave her curt order:

"Show me how to cook! How to cook beans and hot cakes and trout and coffee. You've got to show

me how to do all of these things by tomorrow or go get yourself another place. Give me an apron. There!" She snatched up one, donned it quickly, reached out her hand for a big iron spoon. "Hurry," she commanded. "Teach me!"

CHAPTER XIII

“EATING BREAD AND HONEY . . .”

NOT Beatrice Corliss herself could have analysed the emotions with which she rode toward the new cabin at Hell's Goblet. In the main she imagined that she was irritable and indignant, though determined that no person other than herself should know it; least and last of all Bill Steele. Also she was inclined to feel mortified, almost humbled by a man whom she detested and was set upon continuing to detest more and more heartily as time went by and opportunity allowed. He had outgeneraled her before, twice she counted it. In a way this going to him was a tacit acknowledgment that the third crisis had come and that to him were the spoils. And yet, now and then as she rode through the forest lands, a little twitching at the corner of her mouth was a half smile.

Into that mouth, serious and sober enough the greater part of the time, she musingly and youthfully put a blistered thumb. She was thinking, and the thought puckered her brows, that she had dreaded today and yet that she had looked forward to it with the positive thrill of adventure. She told herself that this was in its way a mere matter of disagreeable business: she had foolishly given a promise and was keeping it. It was just as though, having made an unwise speculation, she in the end shrugged her shoulders and paid her promissory note. But that odd little thrill,

that tingling sense of standing at those magic doors which open to give view of the port of adventure, that breathless eagerness which had been absent in past financial losses, was a most persistent companion to-day. . . . Every time that she found her lips twitching she frowned formidably.

In Steele's attitude as she remembered it there had been more than a polite hint of contempt for a pale handed hot house lady; she wondered, among a score of other considerations, if he would be observant enough to note how these latter days outdoors during which she had been abroad in the dawn and had moved homeward through the sweet dusk, had put a warmer tone into her cheeks? If he would notice how she came alone, on horseback? That she rode well, as well in fact as any girl of the sort of which he approved? Not that it mattered the least little bit in the world whether big impudent Bill Steele approved or not . . . she just wondered, that was all!

And yet . . . though Miss Corliss herself did not seek to analyse everything . . . it was because of what Bill Steele would think that she changed her first plan as to the mode of her arrival. She would go alone and he would know that she was no cowardly little thing; she would ride all the way on horse back, and he would know that, too, realizing that she did not require Parker and a car everywhere she went.

"I am going for a ride, Della," she had told her maid lightly. "Since I may go on into Summit City I don't want to look like Farmer Brown's daughter."

Bill Steele had asked her how old she was: "About

twenty-five?” She wondered if he was just making fun of her then, or if he meant that? The fine lines about one’s eyes . . . he had said something of that sort. Her glass hadn’t shown them. Today she didn’t look more than seventeen or eighteen, and she knew it. . . . She laughed softly as she bent her head to avoid a low fir branch.

“I’ll show him,” she meditated, “that a Corliss promise is as good as gold though made lightly and to the most bitter of enemies or negligible of individuals; that I waste no more thought on Bill Steele than on a chipmunk.”

Then, visualizing both the big bulk of Steele and the tiny body of the scampering little animal to whom she had likened him, she startled her horse by laughing gaily to herself. Then, in duty bound, she puckered her brows disapprovingly.

Down by the ford where the little meadow was and where Steele’s horse still browsed and dozed and otherwise disported itself contentedly, she came upon Steele himself, his eyes brightening as they filled to the fresh beauty of her. He had admitted to himself . . . to no one else . . . the fine quality of her loveliness that other day when she received him in her well fitting house dress. Now, her lithe slender form in the most becoming of riding habits, her cheeks warm with the ride, her eyes glowing, her mouth redder, he thought, than ever mouth was before, he found her utterly perfect from the top of her head of curling brown hair to the soles of her black, spurred boots. And so the thing he said by way of welcome was:

"By jove, Trixie, you look like a boy in those togs! Glad to see you just the same. Fact is, I like you better that way. If you'd only been a boy, now . . . Can you get off alone, or shall I lend a hand?"

But she was ready for him today though her first emotion under the shock of his greeting was a distinct surge of resentment and disappointment. She nodded at him brightly, slipped from the saddle before he could come two steps toward her and said lightly:

"Here I am. You know we Corliss folk are very particular in the matter of keeping a promise; father once lost a lot of money, by dropping everything and going half across the continent to a wedding, simply because long before he had made a laughing promise to the groom. Who," she added in perfectly simulated carelessness and innocence, "was one of father's old negro servants."

Steele's sudden spontaneous laughter told her that he had not failed to understand.

"Good!" he chuckled. "Didn't think you had it in you, Trixie. Honest I didn't. Bet you've been shaping that speech up ever since you left the house!"

And here already was Beatrice Corliss blushing hotly. If she lived always she would always go on hating this impossible man more and more with every day. She *had* prepared her little speech, giving considerable thought to it on her way, desirous of insulting him as nicely as possible and yet clearly enough for him to be sure to catch the innuendo. And now it merely tickled him and afforded him an opportunity for further teasing.

She threw her horse's reins over the limb of a tree before he could come to her, determined that he should know that she required no service from him.

"Came alone, huh?" was his next irritating remark. "I thought you'd do just that!"

"Did you?" She smiled her cool, indifferent smile at him.

"Sure thing," he assured her. "Just to show me that you were not afraid. If you ever want to win a man's heart, my dear boy of a girl, you're got to learn to surprise him now and then. Do the unexpected, you know."

"Thank you ever so much." She was very grave, looking to be frankly grateful as Steele noticed with rising approval. "I'll remember when I go back to town."

"Where the real nice men are? That's right," he advised. "They're your sort. Now, shall we visit the new palace? Built pretty nearly as speedily as Aladdin's and, to my notion, a blamed sight more desirable. Shall I emulate our friend Embry and help you along? Or think you can make it alone?"

No girl ever lived who knew better than Beatrice Corliss that purely feminine trick of a smile eloquently indicating that she had risen to serene heights very far above him, whence she regarded him confused with other insect life of the earth's grass.

They followed Steele's trail up the river to the slope which led to his tableland, Steele dropping a couple of paces behind her, his eyes showing his admiration now that she could not see it, Beatrice seeking to breathe

evenly so that when they came to the top he could not offer further remarks upon her frailty. Arrived at the top she stopped with a quick little beat of the heart as she saw the cabin. She had not looked for this from him.

Now she had made it her business that not only was he to be denied supplies at Camp Corliss and Summit City, but any sort of lumber from either the Blue Cañon mills or from the Indian Valley camp. What Steele had done here must be accomplished very largely without tools and nails, unless he went far for them, without such hardware as hinges and door knobs. And at the first glimpse of Steele's cabin she told herself that her commands had not greatly inconvenienced him and that his abode was nothing short of charming.

He and Turk Wilson and Bill Rice had cut four young trees for the corner posts, leaving the branches unmolested save upon the sides which were turned toward the queer building's interior. With trunks sunk deep in the ground the trees appeared to be growing here, to have been standing here since the cones fell from the big mother. Though the construction of the walls had been the simple matter of stringing slender saplings horizontally and then interweaving them with the thick, flat branch-ends of fir, in their completed state they appeared to be flourishing where they were massed, catching the sunlight upon their myriad glistening needles, hinting at a bower within which was not to be expected from the big hands of Bill Steele.

Nor had Beatrice looked to him for these other

things he had accomplished. A few old boards which Bill Rice had discovered off in the forest where many, many years ago a solitary individual had lived his solitary life in his rude shanty, now a lonesome ruin, had been made into the gabled roof of Steele's palace. But that Beatrice could not know; for the boards were concealed first by the damp leaf mould which Steele had brought a hundred yards for the purpose, and in the rich soil giving a gaily coloured thatch were the countless blue and yellow flowers which thrived here as they had done in the meadow.

Nor was that all; Beatrice wondered where was the end of all that "that man Steele" had accomplished in this handful of days? Up on the hillside, at some spot lost to view in a tangle of bushes, he had tricked a bright little stream from its course, swung it this way and that with an old spade serving quite as well as wand or Aladdin lamp, so that now the merriest of flashing rivulets gurgled by his door and sped away through grass and rocks to fall bickering into Thunder River. Along its rim were flowers of the sort that love the waterways, red blossomed with lush, thick green leaves.

On each side of the cabin door was a pile of rocks with rich black soil sifted among them, crowned with ferns with pretended at being very much at home here.

"Isn't it pretty!" cried Beatrice, her eyes brightening. Since she had come today, since that coming was a tacit acknowledgment of defeat, she had meant from the first to show him that she knew how to lose with no

suggestion of a whimper. So, "I congratulate you, Mr. Steele. I should have had a man like you to advise me when I laid out Summit City."

"She's a good little sport, after all," said Bill Steele to Bill Steele. And to Beatrice, lightly: "All done in honour of the Queen, you know. Glad she approves. But she is interested most of all . . ."

"In the kitchen!" cried Beatrice quickly, guessing what was coming and promptly forestalling him. "May I peek inside?"

This time, turning swiftly, she surprised for the first time in Steele's eyes a flash of admiration. He hid it without delay, masking it with his old laughing look. But she had seen it. And . . . though of course there was no reason in it and she knew it . . . a little pleasurable thrill danced down her blood. Bill Steele at their first meeting had challenged all that there was of woman in her; now let him look out for himself. If it was to be war between them, then let it be war many sided, *guerre à outrance!* Let there be never an available weapon left rusting in its sheath.

"The chef's realm is apart from the king's palace," Steele told her with an assumption of dignified gravity. "Lest smells of onions and hot grease assail the royal nose. There is the kitchen."

He pointed. Beatrice saw it now, though until this moment it had gone unnoticed, so did it blend in with the forest behind it. It was what the folk of Mexico or Southern California would term a *ramada*, though its walls were of fir boughs instead of willow withes. A square, flat roofed shed rudely made but defying pas-

sage of the sun, with Steele's diverted mountain stream conveniently near it.

But this stream must be crossed before they came to the kitchen. There were hardly necessary but none the less picturesque looking stones making the ford and Beatrice stepped out upon them. As the first turned under her and she threw out her arm, balancing, Steele caught her hand, steadying her. She merely laughed, nodding her thanks, since he had done but the natural, unpremeditated thing and she was determined to play the part of one who loses good humouredly. But for an instant he held her hand thus and, with the thread of water between them, stood looking curiously into her eyes.

"Is it an omen?" he asked quite gravely.

"I don't understand."

He let her fingers slip slowly through his and she merely lifted her brows in careless interrogation.

"A man and a girl standing as we have stood," he informed her, "hands clasped across running water . . . means something to certain peoples."

"Does it? Just what?"

"A very simple and rather sensible way of getting married!"

Beatrice's laughter, as spontaneous as ever his had been, fell pleasantly on his ears, mingling with the musical gurgle of the water.

"You would make it appear, Mr. Steele, that the wilderness is, after all, immensely conventional; that, since I offended it by coming without a chaperone, it takes matters into its own hands. Really, you are

the most absurd man I ever heard of! Now, shall the cook look at her province?"

"Just the same," maintained Steele stoutly, looking as grave as before, "it's a sign and a token. Maybe a warning. We'd better look out, Queen Bea. Wouldn't it be awful . . ." He achieved a shudder which she found remarkably well done.

"Perfectly terrible," she laughed back at him, and he noted that the dimples were still there and, as he put it, "working."

In the *ramada*, which they reached side by side, Beatrice found no evidences of want. Bill Rice's trip to the Junction had resulted in the sides of bacon swinging from the roof pole, in the strings of onions and red peppers which should constitute the chief interior decoration of any *ramada* in the world, in tin cups and plates and iron knives and forks, in all that went to make a real kitchen in the woods. There was a rustic table covered with red oilcloth, chairs improvised from boxes and upholstered in crash sacking. And there was a stove, a little sheet iron camping affair, set on rocks, and with a real stove pipe pushing upward through the fir bough ceiling. Pendant from the roof poles were tin cans labelled flour, beans, salt, butter, cottolene, onions, and so on, all doubly protected against inroads of the chipmunks.

Beatrice stood looking about her with the critical eye of the new domestic who for the first time comes into the field of her fresh endeavours. She noted pots and pans against the wall, the keg of water close at hand, the pile of dry stove wood. Upon the table was

a gaily flowered covered dish, the one fragile article to be seen, set conspicuously alone, insistent upon drawing attention.

"Must be nectar of a sort," suggested Beatrice. "To demand so wonderfully beautiful a receptacle." Steele chuckled.

"Scarcely less," he rejoined. "That dish, chosen I might say painfully in a distant city by the Chief Emissary, Bill Rice, set the royal exchequer back to the tune of ninety-eight cents. Notice the new colour scheme, purple roses against a field of orange with violets flirting between a pale shade of red and a deep shade of pink! Will the queen deign to lift the cover?"

Realizing that she was always on the verge of forgetting that she would rather have "died than come here today," Beatrice obeyed. Steele, explaining, offered the remark:

"From the only literature pot to the occasion with which I happen to be conversant, the good old poem dealing with a situation not unlike today's, I judge that whenever the Queen is in the kitchen she ought to be . . ."

"Eating bread and honey!" laughed Beatrice. "Mr. Steele, your thoughtfulness touches me deeply! And I do love bread and honey. And here's butter, too. If you don't mind . . . you see, with the ride over and a pretty fair appetite at ordinary times . . ."

And Steele wasn't quite so sure of his Beatrice Corliss as he had been before. He saw her perched on the edge of his table, a trim booted little foot swung back and forth and Beatrice's white teeth met through a most

delectable morsel. Her eyes were dancing quite as though she would a great deal rather he here doing just what she was doing than anywhere else he could think of. Both dimples were there . . . very much there, he thought . . .

"Poor little daughter of the rich," he said, and it struck her that his voice was strangely gentle for him, "you'd have amounted to something if you'd only had half a chance."

"I thought," objected Beatrice, having swallowed, "that it was your plan to make me over into what I should be. You spoke very eloquently in that vein the day I first saw you."

"But that was long ago," he said, watching her very keenly. "Much may happen in twenty-six days . . ."

"Twenty-four," corrected Beatrice. And then she could have bitten her tongue out. For again the laughter leaped up in his eyes and she knew that he had tricked her and her face was hot. For an instant she could not hold her eyes steady on his.

"So you've kept count, too?" was what he said. "Yes, twenty-four is right. Funny we both remembered . . . funny about our holding hands out there . . ."

"I didn't promise to make the fire," said Beatrice quickly. "If you will get it started I'll prepare . . . What will it be? Luncheon? Just as soon as I finish my bread and honey."

"Right," said Steele. "But it is funny, just the same. Isn't it?"

"Very," answered Beatrice aloofly. "But, if you

care for the actual fact of the matter, I don't believe that I held your hand at all."

"You did," he assured her positively. "You even squeezed it a little too. Shall I show you?"

"No, thanks." It was high time for the coolness of her tone to congeal to ice and Beatrice gave the matter her skilled attention. "And now, what shall I serve for you?"

"Better a feast of herbs . . ." began Steele. But Beatrice sighed in nicely simulated ennui and turned her back on him to peek into the tin cans swinging from the ceiling.

CHAPTER XIV

BEATRICE MAKES BISCUITS

STEELE built the fire and singing in full throated content went for another armful of wood. Beatrice appropriated the freshest looking of certain doubtful dishcloths improvised from flour sacks and so was aproned. Steele, returning with marked promptness, stood at the wide doorway, his arms heaped high with fuel, his eyes taking stock of her after his frank fashion. Her sleeves were up on arms round and rosy, her hair was already beginning to achieve new charm by defying various pins, she had a frying pan in one hand and the last morsel of honeyed bread in the other. To disguise the real effect this vision of Beatrice, domesticated, had upon him Steele summoned a shake of the head and a frown.

"You've sort of spoiled the boyish effect," he said as he threw down his load of wood. "But Lord, a man mustn't expect everything in a cook, must he?"

"The water will be boiling in another minute," said Beatrice, quite matter of fact. "Will you have tea or coffee? And the beans, I see you have some boiled already. I have found the onions; if you'll show me where a tin of tomatoes is I'll give you your *frijoles a la Mexico* in half an hour. Lots of red pepper?"

"Everything seasoned to the queen's taste," laughed Steele, "and it'll suit me."

To a healthy young man with a man's sized appetite, there is no more delightful sight in the world than a pretty girl, flushed and bright eyed over dinner getting in his own kitchen . . . a statement with a canabalistic ring to it, admittedly, yet none the less a serious truth. Bill Steele stood for a little staring in at her from the outside whither he had withdrawn to give her room for her operations, and Beatrice fighting womanfully for her outward calm in an environment which set her heart in a flutter seemed all unconscious of his near presence. She pried off tops of cans, peeking into them curiously; she sliced onions with no visible shudder, though with an upturned nose now and then; she strove unavailingly to keep the tears out of her smarting eyes and hid them from him by turning her back; and all the time she studiously tried to remember all of those words of wisdom which had dropped from the lips of her own cook.

"That you don't find a more extensive larder," apologized Steele quietly, "is due to the fact that Summit City doesn't know on which side its bread is buttered."

"That sounds interesting." Beatrice stooped to open the little oven door and thrust her hand into it, testing the temperature as she had watched the cook do. "If not quite convincing." She closed the oven, turned to the table and attacked the limited amount of flour with both hands.

"Biscuits!" cried Steele. "You know how to make biscuits?"

Beatrice wasn't quite sure. It had seemed utterly

simple when her cook had done it. Now, if Steele would just go away and leave her alone . . .

"Summit City," continued Steele, leaning against the doorway, his hands in his pockets, his eyes following every movement she made, "is, as one might expect, provincial. Short sighted, you know. It refuses to let me trade there, thereby not only losing many good round iron dollars from my coffers, but taking the chance of getting its little self down in my black books."

Beatrice smiled and began the mixing process. Undoubtedly there were to be biscuits. Hot biscuits and butter and fresh honey.

"Hm," said Steele. "Yes. Where were we? Oh, Summit City. What I was going to suggest was this: Summit City had better wake up, rescind its orders to starve me out and lend a hand. There are a lot of things I want to buy there. For I've come to stay, you know."

"Are there?" asked Beatrice innocently. She had already gotten much sifted flour in her hair, her fingers were very pink looking fingers in a stiffening, adhering white mess, there was a pasty patch on her cheek. "Have you?"

"Since it's against my principles to talk business at meal time," continued Steele carelessly; "and since I've got the notion you won't tarry long with me afterwards, I might as well set you right while you work, huh?"

Beatrice, hunting high and low for a shallow pan to accommodate her first biscuits . . . they were to be what is technically known as dropped biscuits, very ugly, misshapen affairs in their beginnings even under

other circumstances . . . finally decided that she would have to do with one big, handle-less frying pan and as an auxiliary . . . for the biscuit dough seemed to be growing steadily in volume . . . the top of a lard can.

"You ought to go in for clay modelling," grinned Steele as he watched the results she was achieving.

"Have you absolutely made up your mind to do everything in your power to drive me out of the country?"

"Referring to Summit City's indifference or the biscuits?" asked Beatrice.

He chuckled.

"Referring to the orders given in Summit City to block my game in any way possible."

"I have entirely . . . absolutely, you said, didn't you? . . . made up my mind," said Beatrice pleasantly.

Steele slapped his thigh resoundingly.

"It's a pure and unadulterated joy to deal with you!" he announced with gusto. "But for your own good you just use your prerogative and change your mind."

"There; they're ready for the oven." Beatrice put the pans aside, regarding her own handiwork with frank admiration while she rubbed the dough free of her fingers.

"You see, I'm warning you . . . not threatening," he continued lightly, "because I love . . . the looks of your cooking. Don't shy like that! When I make love to you . . . Why, girl, I wouldn't marry you if you were the last woman on the big round earth!"

"It isn't round," said Beatrice brightly. "It's an

oblate spheroid. Besides, nobody asked you to. And besides that, aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?" asked Steele.

"Your little superstition about hands across the water . . ."

He laughed. This was some new, undreamed of Beatrice Corliss today, who pleased him vastly, who set him wondering, whom after his abrupt fashion he determined to cultivate.

"If Summit City insists upon having war," he continued, "war it will be! I'll slap its pretty pink face for it, make it sorry it was ever thought of and in the end make it eat out of my hand."

Beatrice's turn for laughter and she gave it in unstinted freedom.

"The ultimatum has gone forth," she said gaily.

"You lift the embargo. . . ."

"But I won't. I *promise* you I won't."

"That settles it then. All right, Miss Haughty Queen. You'll be sorry some day . . ."

"Which sounds almost like a song I used to know. How does it go . . ."

"I don't want to play in your yard,"
sang Steele.

"I don't love you any more;
You'll be sorry when you see me
Sliding down our cellar door . . ."

"You didn't tell me if it is to be tea or coffee?"

"Coffee, please. Well, we'll consider one matter disposed of. Another suggests itself: I need money.

A lot of it. I need it right-away-quick. I've got to borrow some to get started, borrow it or beg it or steal it. Which will it be? Will you lend me fifty thousand for a starter?"

Beatrice glanced at him sharply to see if he were joking and looked away with her question unanswered. He was smiling, to be sure, his eyes were fairly dancing at her. And yet she had the suspicion that this man of monumental assurance actually meant what he said.

"Yep," he amplified. "Got to have it. Desperate for it in fact. Desperate is the word. Will pay interest on it of course, six percent and my land here as security. How about it? Yes or no?"

"No," smiled Beatrice.

"When a woman says no . . ."

"If it is about a thing like this she means it."

"I'll get the money anyway. Somehow, if I have to hold up the stage. You might as well have the interest."

"No, thank you. Let me see: biscuits, bacon, beans, bread, butter and a *little* honey, coffee . . . is that enough, do you think, Mr. Steele?"

"I think you are a God-blessed brick!" cried Steele in his heart. So to her, looking doubtful, he hesitatingly and begrudgingly admitted that it would do.

A little later he watched her put the biscuits into the oven. He was wondering what she would be like the next time their trails crossed. For the once Beatrice had the better of him; she was merely wondering, though with an interest scarcely less intense than his, what the biscuits would be like when she took them out.

CHAPTER XV

THE POWER OF THE CORLISS MILLIONS

IT was a full week later that Steele announced to himself that his vacation was over, and to Turk Wilson and Bill Rice that he had business "outside" and might be away twenty-four hours or ten days. Then, carrying saddle and bridle down into the little meadow, he put his mare into requisition and rode away toward Camp Corliss. Here he stopped for a casual word with Ed Hurley.

"You old son of trouble," was Hurley's greeting, with a look of perplexity in eyes which had never learned the trick of hiding emotions. "What the deuce are you up to these days? I've got fresh orders about you, orders not a week old."

"Shoot," said Steele, easing himself in the saddle. "What's the latest?"

"I'm to look on you as a moral leper or a small pox suspect; I'm to keep you out of camp, I'm to have no word with you and I'm to see that all my men give you the wide go-by. Otherwise I can quit."

"As strong as that, Ed?"

"Curse it, yes," grunted Hurley. "And, between you and me, Bill, I don't want to lose my job. I know that sounds pretty low down from one friend to another but there are reasons why my salary right now looks to me like a raft to a drowning man. If any man can

understand . . . and make allowances . . . I guess that man's you, Billy."

Steele nodded thoughtfully. Into Hurley's troubled eyes there came the look of guilt, and Steele knew that there was no guilt in Hurley's heart. Down in the southland there was a wife and a baby boy . . . the little chap must be five or six now . . . and a shadow was over them both, the damp, sinister shadow of the white man's plague. For three years had Ed Hurley been fighting the fight with them, and there were times when he felt with bounding pulse that Rose and little Eddie were saved to him, times when he dreaded and his heart shrivelled within him. He had left them and come up here because he must have money, lots of money, to give them every chance in the world. Someday, when the most famous tubercular expert in the west allowed, he would bring them here, up into the clean air of the mountains.

All of this Steele knew.

"Next time I see you in public, Eddie, old man," he said in as gruff a voice as nature allowed him, which is saying rather a good deal, "I'll refuse to know you! We'll even stage a rough and tumble fist fight, if it'll help any. My love to Rose and the kid. They're the good old game sort, Ed. You can't down people of their kind."

And he was gone, headed at gallop for Summit City, a little mist whipped into his eyes by the last look of Hurley's face.

In the little resort town he observed interestedly the many fresh indications of prosperity. Several new

cottages were being built, the addition to the hotel had already assumed goodly and picturesque proportions. Evidently the first scattering advance forces of the tourist armies were on the field, their camp outfits to be seen in the street, some of them already established upon the front porches of the cottages. A six horse team was in front of the store, the big wagon heaped high with boxes and crates, evidently provisions and dry goods from the Junction.

"Rush order, too," meditated Steele. "Camped on the road last night, pulling in early this morning. And, as far as I am concerned, it's water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink."

The thought upon him, he stopped at the post office, wrote and mailed a brief note to Beatrice:

"Dear Cook of mine," it read. "Have you changed your mind about selling me provisions and small truck? Looking over your charming village, I hate to lift my hand against it! It's like swatting a baby. Telephone your storekeeper and chop house man and hotel manager to lift the embargo, that's a nice little Cook. I'll drop in on them in a day or so to learn of their altered attitudes. Some of the biscuits are still left. Turk says we need a dog around camp, anyway. 'Horrid, nasty man!' cries the Queen. Meaning Turk, of course, and never

"Your faithful

"BILL."

Riding on through Summit City, passing first the unsightly rough board shack housing that element, undesired here by Beatrice Corliss, that came to drink and gamble and brawl, he rode down to the little lake where

a few straggling tents stood reflected in the blue water, noted how two men were overhauling a launch and some canoes, and then was lost to the settlement as he continued on his way toward the Junction.

It was reserved for him to learn that afternoon that Beatrice meant all that she had told him, meant it rather more sweepingly than he had imagined. The Junction was a small railroad station, Junction by name only as never had persistent rumour borne fruit in an actually accomplished line from it to the vicinity of Summit City. Like the latter place it had one hotel, so called through courtesy, one store, one chop house. Steele, hungry from his ride, turned into the hotel's front room and demanded something to eat. The man behind a newspaper at a little counter, regarded him keenly, and then abruptly asked:

"Name of Steele?"

"Yes," returned Steele. "Why?"

"Nothin' to eat this time of day," was the rejoinder around the stem of a pipe.

"Bread and butter, a hunk of cold meat, anything will do," insisted Steele carelessly. But his eyes, as keen as the other's with speculation partook of none of the quality of his voice.

"Nothin' to eat," he was informed a second time. "Dinner ain't till six, an' mos' likely there won't be a extry place at the table then. We're filled up."

"Who owns this place?" demanded Steele.

"Miss Corliss of Thunder River Ranch," was the more than half-expected reply. "Bought me out this week."

Steele swung on his heel and went out, crossing the street to the chop house whose triangle hung from the wooden awning at the front door.

"Got anything to eat?" he asked shortly of the greasy looking man in shirt sleeves who also was idling behind a newspaper. "For a man named Steele?"

"Nope," he was cheerfully informed. And the greasy gentleman lowered his paper to look over it with frank interest at the man who was already known widely hereabouts as an individual who had incurred the Queen's blighting displeasure.

"Bought out by Miss Corliss?"

"Yep."

Steele had forgotten his hunger, for a little undecided whether to be irritated or amused. In the end his old, wide grin came back to him, and he went out with the chop house man staring after him wonderingly. Thereafter it required but fifteen minutes to assure him that Beatrice had made it impossible for him to buy provisions or tools or any sort of supplies in the Junction.

Puzzling over the novel situation, finding it both ridiculous and yet quite to be looked for from Beatrice Corliss and her almost inexhaustible wealth, he walked down the shimmering railroad tracks to the station, turning in to learn when the next San Francisco-bound train was expected. Swinging about the corner of the building he came face to face with Joe Embry and a lean, long, moustached individual in shirt sleeves and vest and battered hat. At the sound of a footstep the lean man whirled suddenly, his keen grey eyes alert.

"Hello, Banks," said Steele, putting out his hand and ignoring Embry after the one searching look. "What's the word?"

Banks put out his hand, a shade of uncertainty passing swiftly across his face, his eyes running with quick, stabbing fashion between Steele and Embry.

"So — so, Billy," he returned the greeting. "Staying in town long or just catching a train?"

Now that puzzled Steele. He had known Jim Banks casually for half a score of years and had numbered him, after his carelessly good humoured fashion, as a friend. Now the man seemed not only not particularly friendly but positively ill at ease. Then Steele caught the winking of the sunlight on the metal star on Banks's woollen shirt, peeping out from under his vest.

"Constable now, Jim?" he asked. "Deputy sheriff, or what?"

Banks drew back the flap of his vest. Steele whistled.

"Sheriff!" he said. "Good business, Jim. Well, see you later."

And he went into the station, conscious the while that both Embry and Banks were regarding him intently.

"Now what the devil's up?" he wondered. "What's Embry chinning with a sheriff for? He ought to know better by this time. And if they weren't talking about me I'll eat a man's hat! If I ever eat anything again!" as the emptiness of his stomach recalled itself to him.

The station agent, busy with his telegraphic key, turned, fixed him with a vacant eye and went on click-

ing out mysterious messages. In a moment however, he dropped his hand to a cold cigarette and nodded.

"When does Number Five get in?" Steele asked him.

"Smash-up on the line," said the railroad man. He cocked an eye at the clock. "About two hours and a half yet."

"Can you get a message across to Thunder River for me?"

"I can send it on to White Rock and they can relay it from there by telephone."

Steele scribbled upon the yellow pad which was handed him and the message was promptly put on the wire. It was signed "Your admiring Bill," and ran:

"Last call: Will you lift the embargo or shall I start in putting your little villages out of business? Rush answer while I go out and get something to eat."

"You're Bill Steele?" said the agent, looking at him with a growing interest. And, with a grin, "You're in luck; Number Five carries a dining car this time of year!"

Coming out into the sun Steele found that Embry had gone about his business and that Jim Banks was waiting for him.

"They've got the count on you this trip, Billy," offered the sheriff, coming forward to meet him. "It's like you to go start something for a meal and the fun of it. Take a tip from me and don't do it. I'll slip you a sandwich myself and a bottle of beer if you'll just move easy and keep your mouth shut."

"Retained already by Embry?" demanded Steele shortly. Banks lifted his gaunt shoulders.

"It was Corliss money that put me in my job, Billy," he returned equably. "It will be Embry influence that keeps me in it. I'm no lawyer, but it's open and shut that I've got to gather you in if you start anything that looks like disturbing the peace. Get me?"

"I have a little business in San Francisco," returned Steele thoughtfully. "If I mix things with you, Jim, it'll mean getting held up here a day or so, won't it?"

"It would mean ninety days in jug," grunted Banks. "She'd have you railroaded, Billy. Oh, she can do it all right."

Steele frowned, then his face cleared as he cried warmly:

"She's a corker, Jim! By the Lord, she's a wonder!"

"She sure is, Billy. And it's lucky you take it that way. Now you just stick around here and pretty pronto I'll slip you a handout."

But Steele shook his head.

"It's only a couple of hours to wait, Jim. I'll eat on the train."

And when at last the train pulled in and there had come no reply to his message to Beatrice, he left with the station agent a second telegram for Miss Corliss:

"Congratulations on winning in an initial skirmish. May there be many more. Don't waste all your ammunition prematurely. Shall drink your health and final defeat in the best the dining car carries. Joyously,

"BILL,"

CHAPTER XVI

A BELATED DISCOVERY

SAN FRANCISCO the virile, town for a man like Bill Steele when such a man was in mood for any city, clamorous and exultant as it was, blown through with the clean winds of the Pacific, stirring the pulses, today awakened slight response within him. From the lower deck of the Key Route ferry boat he watched the old landmarks impatiently, eager for the slip and a foot on Market Street. In the crowds at the Ferry Building, jostling with the rest, he hastened out to the street, with hand uplifted for the first taxicab to be had. Whirled to the Palace Hotel he registered, paid for a room and went to the telephone booth. From the telephone he went to breakfast, from breakfast straight back to the telephone.

It was nearly noon when he got track of the man he wanted. Rick Verril whom he caught "on the fly" at the Bohemian Club told him that Carruthers was not only in town, having arrived a day or so ago, but was looking for him. Verril would see him at lunch at the Club; wouldn't Steele run in on them then?

But Steele, with much to do and with knowledge gained aforetime of the sort of thing to be expected if Verril got hold of him, promised to drop in at some vague "later on," left word for Carruthers to meet him at the hotel, and went about his business.

At one o'clock Carruthers, a young, quick eyed, almost gaudily dressed young fellow, threw open Steele's door, bursting in upon him breezily.

"Hello, Bill," he cried warmly. "Been looking for you high and low. The melon's dead ripe and . . . Busted again?"

Bob Carruthers . . . known not so very long ago as Plunging Bobbie Carruthers . . . had reached that time of life when a man must stand upright on his own pair of legs or just wobble. And Bob Carruthers didn't wobble. Perhaps one reason was Sylvia Templeton, Mrs. Carruthers now for two years. At any rate what his father, Railroad Carruthers, had done before him in the East, Bobbie Carruthers was reported to be doing in his own way and a kindred line in the West.

As their hands fell apart the two men looked keenly into each other's eyes.

"Comparatively speaking," returned Steele, shoving a chair to his guest and sitting on the edge of his bed, his knee caught up between two strong, brown hands, "I'm busted. But I've got enough for a small bet yet, a sort of entering wedge, you know. If I scrape hard I can pry about twenty thousand loose. If the melon is ripe as you say, and you still figure that you want me in on the slicing, I'm ready. I've got a side line, however, and I want another fifty thousand to bear my little wad company."

"Mine, I suppose?" asked Carruthers.

Steele nodded. Carruthers shook his head and sighed.

"Why can't you let the other boobs dig the yellow

dirt out of the ground and then take it when it's all nice and clean and minted, Billy? Well, I'll advance what you want if you are sure it won't cut in on the other game."

"I'll guarantee that. 'And you're still sure you want me in on your proposition?'"

"Doubly sure!" Bobbie Carruthers' smile was entirely joyous. "Work has got to be started right away, options grabbed you know, and I can't touch it right now. And here's the reason, old Billy boy, the double reason. Look at it!"

From his wallet he had drawn a very bad photograph. Twins and no doubt of it; twins that couldn't be a week old and already their photograph, so vain about them was their young father, was pretty well worn out.

"How's Sylvia?" asked Steele.

"Bully. So's Bobbie the Third; so's Sylvia the Second. They're at the place out at San Mateo; I'll be taking you out tonight. And they are the reason. We're striking out southward just as soon as the Doctor will let us go, and in the meantime the Twins won't go to sleep unless they can hold my thumbs! It's a fact, Bill! You wouldn't believe it, but it's a fact! And you wouldn't believe how smart the little devils are; know me as soon as I come into the room."

Steele sighed. He was sincerely glad that they were Twins since that pleased Bobbie and Sylvia, glad that they were wise children according to the proverb and that they liked to hold their father's thumbs, but . . .

"Got their eyes open already, I see," he offered to

Carruthers' obvious expectation that he would say something about them, and knowing considerably less of human babies and their way than of new born puppies. Carruthers grunted and returned the picture to his pocket.

"You see," he continued after a moment, "I wired Dad in New York that he was all of a sudden a double-barrelled grandfather and he was so tickled that I actually believe he went out and got drunk over it. Fact, Steele; teetotaller that he is, I actually believe he did that very thing. And in his second wire . . . he's been telegraphing every few hours ever since . . . he assured me positively that our tip was right and tipped me further we'd better not let any grass grow. Now I'm off to the Southland with Sylvia and the Twins; I put up the money and you run the job. We split fifty-fifty. What's the word?"

"Of course I'm ready," said Steele promptly. "A little bit more than ready, Bob," with a grin which Carruthers was in no position to understand correctly. "I've been up there, right on the ground, and I've looked things over. First, this is dead sure? I don't want to be laughed at pretty soon. Both White Rock, and the Junction have been definitely discarded? Definitely and absolutely?"

Carruthers waved his hand widely.

"They're forgotten. Work begins sometime this year, probably in August, from neither of those jay towns but from Selby Flat that most people never heard of. Cuts in to the south of the Thunder River coun-

try, runs through Sunrise Pass and on over into Indian Valley that way. . . . What the devil are you laughing at? ”

Again he was in no position to understand what thoughts teemed in Steele's brain. For Steele was indulging freely in a burst of mirth which startled the travelling man in the room across the hall no less than it did Bobbie Carruthers. And while Carruthers knew that his old friend was not the man to take leave of his senses just because a much-talked of golden harvest now looked ripe for the reaping, still . . .

“ Oh, of course you don't understand,” grinned Steele. “ Why should you, you with your head full of twins? You can't see that I'd rather this had happened than . . . Look here, I'll start this proposition on the jump right now; you give me all the dope you've got corralled, put the cash in the bank for me, keep in touch, join me as soon as you can and . . . oh, Lordy! Won't I have the Young Queen where I want her now! ”

“ Queen? ” frowned Carruthers. “ Young Queen? What's that? Name of your new mine or something? ”

“ That? ” Slowly a deep gravity came into Steele's eyes to dwell there serenely. He even put out a hand and laid it on Carruthers' shoulder. “ It's the girl I'm crazy in love with, Bobbie . . . just guessed it myself, by George! Don't know why I blabbed it out to you; you're so infernally paternal, I suppose. I wouldn't have a soul know it. Yes, sir; it's me, Bill Steele, crazy in love with a girl . . . but I'm damned if I'd give her the satisfaction of knowing it! ”

Carruthers was thoroughly mystified.

"What's the good loving a girl and hiding it from her?" he asked. "She's the one to tell first, you old fool."

"No; you're wrong there . . . By Jove, I'm in love!" He appeared to be fairly "bowled over by it," as Bobbie Carruthers told Sylvia that evening. "It's a fact. But don't you talk, Bobbie! If you tell a soul I'll murder you."

"Just the same," maintained Carruthers, "you ought to tell her. That's half the fun of it."

"Not yet." Steele shook his head with great positiveness. "She isn't ripe for it yet, old man. She . . . she's young yet. I've got to sort of educate her, train her up, you know . . ."

"Who is she? Do I know her?"

Steele, fearful of what might come of too great an interest on Carruthers' part and consequently on Sylvia's, answered cheerfully:

"No, you wouldn't know her. A young Italian widow."

CHAPTER XVII

THE MADNESS OF BILL STEELE

IN and about the Thunder River country folk began to speak of the madness of Bill Steele. Certainly he had come upon the Queen's Ranch with a chip on his shoulder, certainly he had in more than one way offended her, certainly he was seeking, in the face of her stubborn opposition, to accomplish some very absurd things. At least so said they who watched with interest.

In brief here are some of the bits of gossip which Timber-Jack carried to Mucker, Mucker to Cowboy, Cowboy to Farmer Brown, Farmer Brown into the Emporiums through which flowed the blood of the Sierra:

Steele was a gambler, whose profession it was to take big chances, whose winnings were the crooked winnings of his class; he was the actual spirit giving life to the string of gambling houses through the mountains, for at last Flash Truitt of the Summit City saloon had published the fact. In some underhand fashion Steele had acquired eighty acres of land about Hell's Goblet, planning other mystery-shrouded, underhand attacks upon the Queen's Ranch. (It was whispered that he was a sluice robber; also that he might be looked to for cattle thieving, using his ill gotten eighty acres as an outlet for his thefts; also that down in Mexico, tak-

ing advantage of a lawlessness made possible by the quarrelling of Carranza and Villa, he had pillaged ranches and held up trains. Wonderful, no less, is the growth of rumour!)

Further, to go on sketchily, he was more a fool than a business man; he had bought a lot of land lately, heaven only knew how much, timber lands on the fringe of the government reserve, whose standing forests were worthless because they were inaccessible and would remain inaccessible until the youngest Sierra baby was a greybeard or a tottering grandmother, as the case might be. Also that, in the flats at both ends of Sunrise Pass, in Indian Valley on one hand, in Bear Valley on the other, he had bought all the land to be had and had installed lumber camps . . . was actually cutting timber right and left! He had bought . . . the price varied from five thousand to two hundred thousand, as prices have a way of doing! . . . Grouse Lake and Mirror Lake, both twenty miles from nowhere. Over some two hundred square mountain miles Bill Steele was the busiest man to be found, busy in the achievement of absurdities. And, to put the proper crown upon all of this nonsense, he was building a town in Indian Valley, a town in Bear Valley!

"Just because he's set out to buck Summit City," people agreed. "Trying to run the Queen out of business!"

Whereat there were many winks and smiles and quiet nods.

Finally let it be mentioned in passing that those who

seemed to know most of Bill Steele's plans and to see most clearly where they would end, were Joe Embry, Flash Truitt the gambler, and Jim Banks, Sheriff.

"The war is on!"

wrote Steele to Beatrice.

"God save the Queen now!"

And Beatrice, having given a grave ear to the many persistent rumours, summoned Booth Stanton and Ed Hurley to a conference at which, through her request, Joe Embry also was present.

"He is a fool," cried Stanton.

"No fool, Bill Steele," muttered Hurley.

"A dangerous man, dear lady," cautioned Embry. "He must be broken before he grows to be an actual menace. He is vindictive."

At which Stanton scoffed and Hurley scowled while Beatrice reserved judgment.

"Everything in reach that Steele hasn't bought up," offered Embry thoughtfully, "he has an option on. There's something back of it."

"Bluff," snorted Booth Stanton. "Just colossal bluff. Next thing will come an offer to buy out some of Miss Corliss' interests, Summit City, perhaps."

"Keep informed of everything he does," commanded Beatrice at the end of the conference, "and let me know immediately. Mr. Embry," as Hurley and Stanton took their leave, "I have grown into the way of calling upon you so frequently that I wonder if I am not abusing your generosity?"

"Whenever it is a question of Steele," said Embry smoothly, "I am at any one's disposal. You know that I, too, have pledged myself to drive him out of the country. As for your calling upon me too frequently . . ."

He broke off abruptly, lifting his piercing eyes to hers.

"Dear lady," he continued softly, "the one thing I ask in the world is the joy of serving you. You have come to know that, haven't you? I have never known a woman like you, no surprising thing since there never was another like you created! I thank God that for a little you and I have had one common interest; if I could dare hope that always we might have our interests in common . . . Because I have not babbled of it, have you failed to know, Beatrice?"

Beatrice stared at him half incredulously, flushed and turned away. She was suddenly uncomfortable under eyes grown ardent; a few months sooner, a month, even, she might have been pleased . . . she wasn't sure, but she might have been pleased to hear such words from him. But now, for no particular reason to which she could lay her mind, she was both uncomfortable and disappointed.

Some day, no doubt, when the right time came and brought with it the right man, she would marry as did other girls. If in an hour of cool thought she had asked herself which one of the men she knew was the logical husband for her she would have perhaps singled out Joe Embry. He was of her class, of her station, he was one upon whom she came as near leaning as she

had ever come to lean upon any man or woman in the world. She liked him, just how much there had never until now come the need to say. And now, suddenly putting a flush into her cheeks which merely confused her and which misled Embry, there flashed into her thought a picture of the impudent, gay hearted Bill Steele . . . the man she detested. . . .

"Let us not speak of this today, please!" she cried hurriedly. "I don't know . . . I don't think that I could ever care for you that way. I . . . I am acting like a school girl, and I know it!" she burst out impatiently. "I am ashamed of myself. But . . . please let's not talk of it now."

Embry bowed, gravely accepting his dear lady's wish as his law. But his eyes had brightened; Beatrice fancied that she saw a look almost of triumph in them. His massive shoulders filled her eyes as he turned away; she noted as she had noted so many a time the masterly carriage. The man was forceful, dynamic . . . he could push a steady way from little things to big, he could put out his hand for what he wanted, take it and hold it. And now he wanted her. . . . She wondered, with a puzzled, half frightened look in her eyes, what answer she would give him when he came again?

"Pooh!" she cried out suddenly, whisking about and going to her room. "I am a little fool this morning and Joe Embry is a mere man that I could break between my thumb and finger. What has come over me?"

It was characteristic of Embry that he did not seek to communicate with her again for several days. He

came and went about Summit City, ostensibly upon the business he had mentioned to her long ago, looking for both a summer home site and for timber investments. But he had made no outright purchases and rumours even of options were vague.

In the meantime Bill Steele's endeavours went forward in full swing. He had both hands filled, filled and overflowing. Wasting no time seeking men here he got his crews from Sacramento and San Francisco, necessary supplies and materials with them. The first building to go up in Indian Valley was a store; the first in Bear Valley a store. And, with the arrival of the initial consignment of goods at each, a note from Steele to Beatrice apprised her of the fact, adding that he was ready to return her an answer to her "embargo act." Hereafter he could supply not only himself and his own crews, but the scattering families through the mountains. "Poor little Summit City," he concluded. "I feel almost sorry for it, Trixie. It's on the giddy slide to oblivion right now!"

Where he had bought timber tracts he lost no time in installing lumber mills. Where the money came from was still a mystery to the countryside, much credence having been given the earlier report that Steele was playing a game on a shoestring. But his mills spelled actual big cash investments, and though still branded as mad, he began to cause much debate.

Still another crew of men was reported busy upon Steele's land at the Goblet. Just what was being accomplished here, even what was being planned, was not clearly known abroad. Steele kept his men hard at

their work, giving them no time for trips and gossip outside; Beatrice, for her part, unwilling to appear concerned in anything which "that man Steele" did, gave strict orders that no Thunder River men were to manifest either curiosity or interest. Joe Embry, though he strove unaffectedly to learn what was afoot, was puzzled to know whether Steele was beginning mining operations or was insanely seeking to develop water power. The latter surmise was the more colourful of the two, since Steele's men were labouring close down to the bed of the stream near the Goblet and were reported to be preparing to swerve the river from its course just above the big bowl. There came thoughtful, puzzled days for Joe Embry.

Soon came the stringing of telephone wires through the forest lands; employing his instrument at the Goblet Steele was enabled to keep in touch with what went forward at Indian City and Bear Town, as his two new village sites were already known; to talk with his timber bosses, to get San Francisco on the line when need was. And, now and again when the mood was on him, to brighten Beatrice's eyes with anger by calling her up despite her emphatic request to be let alone. As the weeks went by and the full spring with them, bringing in the summertime, every day saw some fresh accomplishment an established and stupefying fact.

And then came late July and the first of the railroad men to the mountains. The little mountain papers caught the news and made big headlines, full page excitement of it. Men talked of it exclusively. The

road was coming, but from neither White Rock nor the Junction. It was running from Selby Flat through Sunrise Pass, into Indian Valley and on! Joe Embry's face went chalky-white from rage. Beatrice, stubbornly set in her disbelief until she had talked with one of the higher-ups in Sacramento, was dazed. Steele had known all along; Steele had promised to "slap Summit City's little pink and white face for it"; . . . and the promise was no idle boast. Before the year was over her little tourist town would be standing empty and useless as the mountainseeking crowds followed the line of the coming railroad; in another year who would ride forty miles by stage to Summit City and Corliss Lake when they might come by train into Indian City or Bear Town and to the little lakes which Steele had bought?

For if Summit City gave access to a wild, beautiful country, then did Steele's towns give easier access to a land both more rugged and more beautiful. Beatrice, herself, would have selected as a town site some spot higher in the mountains were it not that she counted expectantly upon the railroad coming from White Rock or the Junction and penetrating her own holdings. She had known that such were the earlier plans of the railroad; that those plans had recently altered came to her now as a complete shock. It was not what she would lose in dollars and cents; she could afford that, and a loss here was always balanced by bigger gains there. But to have Bill Steele laugh at her . . . this was unbearable.

"Don't you care, Trixie," he said over the telephone. And, when she cut him short there, clicking up her receiver, he was unruffled and wrote:

"Don't you care, Trixie; you'll get it all back some day. I'm just holding it for you."

Which, the first step in the love making of Bill Steele, came perilously close to driving her into Joe Embry's eager arms. It did drive her to call upon Embry again, to plan with him the final breaking of the presumptuous and utterly detestable Bill Steele.

"In an ordinary affair of business, Miss Corliss," said Embry thoughtfully, scoring with her more than he knew by making no reference to his proposal of a few days ago, "I know that you are as capable as I am, and in perfect sincerity I believe you are considerably more capable. You have had the training, your fortune is bigger than mine, you have inherited the ability of Ben Corliss. But this is no ordinary business affair, very largely for the reason that Steele is in no particular a business man. Also his methods, as I know better than you, are questionable. If you care to put fifty thousand dollars into my hands I will put with it a similar amount of my own and not only break him and drive him out but make good on our investment."

To Beatrice Corliss that morning fifty thousand dollars or a hundred thousand constituted a small matter provided they inflicted upon Steele the defeat she so devoutly wished him. Furthermore, she trusted Embry. She would, largely as a matter of form, take his note

for the amount. But, even then, in the hot flush of the moment, she hesitated. It was an old Corliss adage not to throw good money after bad but to pull off the hounds when the scent was lost or led to a lair too dangerous to be attacked. The question rose in her mind: "Business man or not, is Steele too much for Embry?"

Embry, quick to see her hesitation, did not press the point. He even turned the conversation away from it, speaking generally of the situation which had arisen, undertaking to make fresh investigations and acquaint her with what he learned. For it was Embry's way, having planted a seed, to stand back from it and give it sun, not to trample it to death.

But, from this conference and others, the impression got out that not only were Miss Corliss and Embry associated in their desire to combat the successes of Steele, but that Embry was Miss Corliss' agent, that he had stepped into Booth Stanton's shoes as local manager. This report, with every seeming of being correct, came in due time to Steele and brought one of his rare frowns.

"I've warned her against him," he muttered thoughtfully. "But of course she wouldn't believe me against him. The slimy, slick son of a gun. I won't have him seeing too much of her."

Beatrice's losses didn't trouble him; he told himself, as he had told her, that she was too rich anyway. Further, if loss to her now meant gain to him, why he was but holding what he took in trust for her later on! But to have Embry in her camp, not to know what

Embry's game was, was a different matter. It was a word from Turk Wilson upon another matter which brought Steele to action in Joe Embry's direction.

"Say, Bill," asked Wilson abruptly, "you got a way about playin' your own hand an' not takin' the other feller in. Jus' the same I'm goin' to ask something."

"Fire away, Turk," nodded Steele. "What is it?"

"Do you or don't you own an' operate the gamblin' house in Summit City? An' the others strung through these hills?"

"I do not," was the prompt answer. But Steele had looked up curiously, waiting for Turk to go on.

"Then Flash Truitt an' Joe Embry is both damn liars," said the succinct Turk.

"They are. At least Embry is. Did they say that?"

"What's more," continued Turk slowly, "Jim Banks says the same thing. When a sheriff says a thing like that an' it ain't so —"

"Then," cut in Steele, "it's high time I had a talk with Joe Embry."

"I'd step easy, pardner," advised Turk, seeing the new look in his employer's eyes. "An' I'd remember one large size thing: Jim Banks is sheriff an' he ain't the same man he used to be."

"Meaning just what, Turk?"

"Meanin' that Embry's somehow got him under his thumb. He used to be a square guy; now he looks out of his eyes at you like a dawg. An' he minds to his name when Embry says, 'Lie down,' or 'Sick 'em.' . . . Say, Bill, will you get me a plug tobacco? . . .

'Aw, I forgot! We got our own stores now, ain't we? . . . Say; what I was goin' to say was this: Let me mosey along when you look Embry up? You an' me work fine in a scrap together. Remember Johnnie Thorp an' them Little Giant boys. . . ."

But Steele laughed at him and shook his head.

"There'll be no fight this time, Turk," he said.

And Turk, following him with musing eyes, shook his own head.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN TWO MEN HATE

CHANCE had it that Steele, seeking Joe Embry with wrath in his heart, found him with Beatrice. A fact in itself not calculated to cool his unaccustomed rage.

"Hey there, you Embry!" he shouted from a distance. "I want a word with you."

It was at Camp Corliss through which he was passing to come to Summit City where he expected to find Embry. Seeing the man he wanted at the door of Ed Hurley's office, just coming out apparently, Steele was glad rather than displeased that Beatrice should be on hand . . . though a distinct wave of disgust surged up within him that she should be so familiarly near and so familiarly disposed toward Embry. Through the open door behind them he caught a glimpse of Hurley's face looking like a man who had just received bad news. He wondered if Rose or Eddie Junior . . . and then he whipped all of his thought back to Beatrice and her companion.

Beatrice had heard his voice calling out, had whirled about just as he swung down from his saddle and strode toward them. He observed that her look was not unlike Hurley's, though in it there was more of plain disappointment and anger. Hurley's look was near tragic. . . .

"Mr. Embry," said Beatrice coolly, her voice carrying clearly above the sound of Steele's big crunching boots, "I shall be glad of your escort, after all. I hadn't foreseen a necessity for it . . ."

The rest was eloquently borne in upon Steele's understanding by the flash of her eyes, disdainfully aware of him; only now that he had unexpectedly appeared were Embry's services to be required.

Steele made no answer until he stood quite close to them where they had come down from the two steps of Hurley's entrance. A moment he stood looking down at her gravely; then his eyes were for Embry alone.

"There happens to be a certain merry warfare on between Miss Corliss and me," he said bluntly. "It's a friendly spat and a square one. Consequently there's no room in it for a crook. Get me, Joe Embry?"

His eyes were like steel now. Beatrice, staring up at him, impressed by the man's physical bigness, felt that odd little thrill go singing through her which she had experienced for the first time when at the Goblet she had watched two men who hated stab at each other with their eyes.

"I am ready if you are, Mr. Embry," she said quickly. "Shall we —"

"Queen or no queen," growled Steele savagely, deep down in his throat, "you're just a little girl, Trixie, and you've got to stand aside when I come to talk with Embry. I'm glad you're here, though. I've just heard that Embry here has said that I am financing the string of rotten dives working through the camps in

the mountains, from Summit City south. How about it, Joe? ”

“ It strikes me, Steele,” returned Embry, in that slow, smooth voice of his which gave no hint of his emotions, “ that you have a way of picking a time for a show of temper when there is a lady present. If you care to look me up —”

“ When I want a man I go find him,” snapped Steele. “ And I don’t care who is present. Did you say that about me? ”

“ Suppose I did? ” came quietly from Embry.

“ Then you are a liar, and you will either eat your words right now or I am going to beat the eternal day-lights out of you! ”

“ Yes? ” said Embry tonelessly.

Beatrice, her breath catching, looked from one of them to the other, from Steele’s blazing eyes into Embry’s dark, smouldering ones, back to Steele’s. He was making no windy boast and her sense was electrically pervaded with a clear conception of his purpose; that he would punish his enemy physically and mercilessly was no vain threat. His voice was vibrant with assurance.

At another time not unlike this she had marked the two men critically; now, as never before, she measured them. It seemed to her that the very bigness of Bill Steele was something triumphant and that must triumph. Embry was a big man, heavy and solid, and yet he lacked utterly Steele’s superb magnificence. For at that vital moment Beatrice glimpsed in this man who warred against her and who mocked at her prestige

almost the superman. Embry breathed power and mastery; so did Steele, and in the two this expression came differently, resulted differently. Embry's was smooth running, Steele's was rugged. . . . From their eyes her swift look dropped to their hands and it was as though she had peeped in on their souls. The hands of Joe Embry, large and carefully groomed and capable, were those of a man who directs other men and reaps through their bodily blows struck for him; the hands of Steele were big and hard and brown, those of a man who battles with life by coming to grips with her, who draws his own water and hews his own wood. . . . She was looking at two modern types, that of the city man, that of the man of the vast outdoors.

Suddenly it was borne in upon the girl that something within her, deep down and weak voiced and uncertain, was crying out, demanding to see these two big bodies hurled at each other. The primal in the situation had penetrated to the primal in her, covered though it was with many generations of softening civilization. And she wanted to see Bill Steele, the man she hated, drive his great hard fist into the expressionless face of Joe Embry, the man whom she knew she was on the verge of marrying! A strange sort of giddiness was upon her, had held her staring an instant, then passed to leave her clear thoughted. But in that brief time she had felt what she had felt, desired what she had desired, yielded ever so little to the currents in the hidden depths of her. It was unreasonable, it was unbelievable, it was impossible. And yet it was not so much as unusual that that which we cry out upon as

unreasonable, unbelievable and impossible had come about. . . .

And then here was Beatrice Corliss herself, not an elemental Beatrice, but a Beatrice of cities and railroads and theatres and balls, laying her hand on Embry's arm, saying quickly:

"Mr. Embry, for my sake! Please! What this man says should not even interest us, let alone stir our anger. Shall we go now?"

Embry paused as though uncertain. Steele's short laugh was as ugly a sound as Beatrice had ever heard.

"If he takes what I have given him and lies down under it," he said bluntly, "then he's not only a liar, but a damned skulking coward!"

In her heart she knew that that was so. And yet, secure now in her place in the twentieth century and with her back stubbornly turned upon that earlier time which, at crises, goes shouting down the blood of man, she said gently:

"Because I ask it, Mr. Embry? I know it is hard, but . . . Will you come . . . for me?"

There had crept into her voice a tone which startled both men who heard it and yet of which Beatrice was all unconscious; as instinctively as men's fists clench so, with equal instinct, can the woman's voice, her very attitude, become at need her own glorious weapon, and the woman never so much as know it.

"I will come with you," cried Embry quickly. "For your sake."

She laughed at Steele then, the woman the victor, her cheeks grown red, her eyes like his with the fire in

them. And she kept her hand on Joe Embry's arm.

"By God!" shouted Steele, taking a sudden step toward them and fairly glaring at her so that she must fight with herself not to shrink back, so that almost must she fear his clenched fist was meant for her. "I won't have you giving yourself to that man that way! I won't have you touch him!"

Embry's lips were twitching, his close-lidded eyes were watchful. Steele suddenly threw out his hand, thrusting Embry backward so that he was hurled away from Beatrice's side, so that his shoulders struck against the wall of Hurley's shack. Even Embry, anxious to do his dear lady's bidding, was not the man to suffer that without retaliation. He struck back and though the blow landed square in Steele's chest, Steele scarcely felt it. For his blood was no longer the peaceful blood of the man who made merry war but of the man who hates, hates doubly because he loves elsewhere. The great blow he struck in answer made even Ed Hurley cry out in wonderment. . . . Embry's arms flew out, Embry went down. . . .

"You have killed him!" cried Beatrice.

But Embry's hand, though he had not risen, went the short way it knew to Embry's hip. There was the flash of the sun on a glinting gun barrel and he fired.

But Steele had not waited and Embry had not taken that one other half second which, had he been cool minded, he would have reserved. And before he could fire twice Steele's big boot had smashed into his hand and the gun fell ten feet away into the grass. Steele went to it, took it up, hurled it far out into the brush.

"Guns next time, is it, Joe?" he demanded, as Embry got slowly to his feet. "All right. Only quicker and straighter, Joe. For you'll get just one shot."

He half turned, looking for Beatrice. She had gone. With another look at Embry, he strode back to his horse.

"I'm going to get you, Bill Steele," called Embry, on his feet now, his face black with passion. "No, not now. I know I don't stand a chance in the prize ring with you. But, just the same —"

"Shut up," snapped Steele. "So long, Ed."

But, as he swung up into the saddle, Hurley was coming out toward him, calling out:

"Wait a minute, Bill. I've just got a jolt today . . . maybe you can help me. . . ."

"Not Rose?" asked Steele quickly. "Or the kid?"

"No." Hurley's dejection, which he had observed before, still stood at the back of his eyes. "It's my job. I've lost it."

Steele frowned.

"Not because of me? Your being a friend of mine?"

"No. Just because there's no job left here. The Little Giant hasn't been paying for two months. It's pinched out entirely now. We've shut down."

This was news to Steele and he lifted his brows at it. But his first thought was for Ed Hurley and, through Hurley, of Rose and little Eddie.

"Tie your baggage up in your bandanna and come over to the Goblet," he said quietly. "There's a job open for you there, Ed. No, I'm not just making it

for you, either; I need you." And, as he watched the departure of Joe Embry in the direction in which Beatrice had gone, suddenly the good humour came back up into his eyes. "Poor little Queen!" he chuckled. "Losing right and left right now, huh? Well, it won't hurt her and she'll get it back some day. We'll see to that, eh, Hurley?"

"How's that?" asked Hurley, not quite catching the drift of what Steele had said.

But the fuller explanation Steele made only to himself.

"I don't believe there's more than one girl in sixteen dozen tons of them," was his thought, "who could go through all this and come up like a new pin at the end of it. Your luck is trying you out, Trixie mine, and Bill Steele is lending a hand to make you the finest, real girl that ever was!"

But, as he waved his hand to Hurley and rode back toward the Goblet, he was thinking of how Beatrice's hand had laid on Joe Embry's arm. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

BEATRICE DECIDES SHE WILL NEVER MARRY

BEATRICE CORLISS, accomplished business woman, had discovered with something of a start that life was not so simple a matter of dollars and cents as she had long imagined. On the other hand, it was a troublesomely complicated affair and brought times when one did not know just exactly how to take it. Life was something like that man Bill Steele! when it appeared merely frivolling it might have serious intent, when it posed at gravity it might be making mock of her.

The occasion had come for the first time in her life when she could not say clear thoughtedly: "I want this and I don't want that; I will have this and I won't have that!" She found herself flinging about restlessly in her own boudoir, amazing her maid until Beatrice remembered her and sent her away.

She had been deeply thoughtful, she would have said, as she and Joe Embry rode back from Camp Corliss to the ranch house. He, too, had appeared thoughtful; now she wondered if he had "got anywhere." She knew that she hadn't. . . . Then, when at last they had come to the house, Embry had spoken for the second time of his love for her. Or of his desire to marry her? Of course he meant the two to be inseparable conditions, and yet the impression he had made more

emphatically was the latter. And again she had sent him away hastily and with no sensible answer.

"Like a little fool!" she told herself with a sniff of self-contempt.

But Joe Embry would come a third time, and then she must tell him one thing or the other. And now she found herself involved in perplexities. She had liked Joe Embry, she still liked him, more than any other man she had ever known. She held to that stubbornly. But Joe Embry as a friend and Joe Embry as a husband were different matters. Why? She didn't understand. But she felt more and more distinctly that for her to give herself to him as the woman gives when she marries was unthinkable. Why, why and why? There was no reason for it; he was of her class, her station, her "sort." And yet a little involuntary shudder went through her when she thought of herself standing at this man's side, pledging herself to him.

"I suppose," she pondered somewhat wearily, "it's just that I don't love him and that love does count, after all."

And she found herself thinking, with reddening, finally flaming cheeks of Bill Steele. He had made love to her too, he in his insufferably impudent way. It was just as though he had told her: "I'm rather busy just now, but when I can get the time for it I'll run in and carry you off with me." From this point, cooling slowly as emotion gave place to speculation, she contrasted the two men. . . . Both were masterful, each in his way. Yet the mastery of Joe Embry was laid aside in her presence, he called her his dear lady,

he humbly asked to serve, while Bill Steele made fun of her, set his big bulk stubbornly athwart her horizon and dictated. Was there some sense, after all, in that idiotic theory about woman's nature craving something of the plain man-brute in her mate? For though Beatrice persisted both in "thoroughly detesting and despising" Bill Steele, yet he inspired no such shudder as did Embry.

"I'd like to see Joe Embry grind him down into the dust!" she cried passionately. . . . And with the cry came vivid remembrance of the scene before her eyes when Steele and Embry had stood face to face menacingly, and from the troubled depths of her soul there had risen the hot desire to see the man she hated beat down the man she was so near marrying.

If Steele had come into her life in another manner, if he had been respectful in his attitude like others, quietly courteous to her. . . . But she couldn't even imagine it; he could not be Steele and be other in his attitude than he was. And, looking under the brusque impertinence of him, was there really disrespect?

It struck her that never before had it been so difficult a matter to keep her mind clearly in its logical groove, to move methodically from point to point until she achieved perfect clarity of vision. Now she found that she was remembering that day with Steele at the Goblet, recalling every detail of their meeting, going repeatedly over trifles over which she had gone repeatedly before. The making of the biscuits. . . . They were good biscuits, too, despite his banter, and he had enjoyed their crisp brown crusts as well as she! . . . the

chance holding of hands across the water. . . .

"Sentimental little idiot!"

She jerked herself up and refused to follow seductive memory further in this direction. She was not sentimental, she had never been, she was never going to be. That settled it! . . . She hadn't looked like a boy and she knew it; he just said that to cover the real look in his eyes. But she had seen it and had remembered it and had understood. He approved of her, deep down in that rollicking heart of his, he very much approved of her. In fact, he wanted to marry her; she knew that, too. If she could only marry Joe Embry . . . just to punish Bill Steele. . . .

Again the shudder. If she married Embry it would be just on Steele's account and . . .

"I'll marry neither one of them!" whispered Beatrice, as though she scarcely dared take even herself into her confidence, so unsure of herself was she today.

"I don't have to, and I won't."

Which, could Bill Steele have heard, would have satisfied him for the present. But she had no intention that he should know anything whatever about her plans. Let him go on, if he liked, thinking that he could have her one day when he came for her. If she could just continue to make him care for her more and more and then, in the ripeness of time, laugh at him and send him away . . .

"He wouldn't go," she thought ruefully. "He's the most persistent man and the most hateful I ever knew!"

Today, such an uncertain grip did she have on life, she even asked herself the question: "Just why do

I hate Bill Steele?" And as definite an answer as she could discover was that she hated him because she had made up her mind that first disagreeable day to hate him. Another persistent "Why?" Because he had teased her and she was not accustomed to being teased; because he who was a nobody, not satisfied with playing at the equal of her who was a Somebody, actually disported himself as her superior. Was he that? He had found the way to snatch the Goblet land away from her though she defied him; he had remained there and pushed his work steadily ahead though she sought to impede him; he had learned what she had been blind to, namely, the altered railroad plans; he had seemed to have the best of what he called a merry war between them; he had manifested certain unmistakable signs of ability. Next thing he would make a success in Indian Valley with a town which he and no other had built; he would have made another success with Bear Town. Probably he would make a success at the Goblet with whatever he was doing there. Had he the right to treat her as a little girl whose experience was, after all, restricted? If the man wasn't so . . . so *Bill-Steele-ish!* . . . she could actually admire him. An admission made reluctantly, covered immediately by considerations which threw weighty discredit on him: chief among them the ugly fact that he maintained such evil, rowdy places as the saloon and gambling house in Summit City. But was that really his? He had named Joe Embry a liar for the report . . . it would be more like Steele, if he did own these places, to boast of it cheerfully. Certainly, he was no hypocrite. . . .

But Embry had assured her that surmise on the matter had passed to certainty, that Steele was the man from whom Flash Truitt took his orders, to whom Flash Truitt paid over the moneys which came in to him. Somebody lied; was it Steele? was it Embry?

"Joe Embry is my friend," she maintained stoutly. "And he is a gentleman."

But the upshot of the whole interview between Beatrice Corliss and herself was that, while she hated Bill Steele most heartily and despised him, still Embry made her shudder and . . . Bill Steele didn't!

"I am not going to marry anybody . . . ever!" said Beatrice. "I don't have to."

CHAPTER XX

THE GOBLET SURRENDERS ITS SECRET

ATOWN had grown and was called Summit City because Beatrice Corliss, with unlimited wealth at her beck and call, had willed it. Two other settlements began to materialize and take form at the ends of Sunrise Pass because Bill Steele, with large plans in his head, willed them into being. And now a third town of which no one thought yesterday, a town at Hell's Goblet, sprang almost overnight into existence, a feverish, clamouring, strident town, insistent upon crowding its way into the world because omnipotent circumstance shouted for it and beckoned it in. A certain word went echoing through the woods, from the Goblet to Camp Corliss and the Junction; to White Rock and the railroad towns up and down the transcontinental line; across the mountains to Grey Horse and Copperville and Gridley, and wherever it went men laid down their work and listened to it and felt it sweep through their imaginations even as it had swept through the forests, electrifying them. And the word was Gold.

Bill Steele suddenly was no longer the mad Steele, a fool and a busybody. He was a man to cultivate, a man whose slightest word should be caught and brooded over, a man to point out gravely and in envy. Bill Steele had found gold at the Goblet where from the first he had known it was waiting for him.

Gold, and Bill Steele had found it. The man who finds gold is no fool in the eye of his neighbour. And Bill Steele had known it was here all of the time, had known it for full five years! That was the incredible thing to those who did not know the man. But such as Ed Hurley, mine superintendent now at the Royal Flush, as Steele had named his strike, understood. Five years ago Steele had not needed money, his pockets being sufficiently plump at the time. Furthermore, just as he had come to be rather sure that he had made a discovery of considerable importance, he had a telegram from a friend down in Mexico. That friend was in trouble and Bill Steele, heeding the call, caught the first train for the Southland.

"Which," said Hurley, "is just exactly Bill's way of doing business."

Beatrice herself had word . . . not of the town which already was taking form temporarily and very crudely . . . but of the discovery of gold from Steele himself.

"It's a sure bonanza," he had chuckled at her over his telephone line. "The prettiest thing you ever saw unless it be the dainty colouring at times mounting to your majesty's cheek, in honour of which, by the way, I've named it the Royal Flush. A sure winner, eh, Trixie?"

"Puns are hideous!" said Beatrice, for the first time, so considerable was her emotion, replying to Steele's voice along the wire.

Boom Town, it grew to be named, this sudden human

swarm on an upland above Steele's eighty acres. It sprang into being full fledged and noisy, complete and self-sufficient, the instant materialization of a word. It might have drawn its own characteristics from the turbulent stream on whose banks it stood, impatient of restraint, rebellious minded, lawlessly inclined but yielding with fierce grumblings to that which kept it in its rugged channel. Almost in the first hour of its existence Boom Town saw one of its denizens killed by another who later was to hang for the deed. Born from tumultuous blood it was to be in its joys as well as in its struggles violent. Good men came into it and remained and with them came other men, who also remained. In one thing only were all alike: each sought to come before the others to other gold.

"It's been washing down the river for a thousand years," they said, and their haste knew no bounds to come to the higher lands, to search eager eyed for other veins or pockets, to drive a triumphant pick fair and square down into the heart of the mother lode. And they were not without their quota of success; here in the wildest of the wild lands of the Thunder River country, claims were staked out, quarrelled over, held by right of might. The law had come with Jim Banks, sheriff . . . and Jim Banks was staking out his own claim.

Here came Flash Truitt, the gambler, and a ranger from Dutton Cañon and many a fire-blooded timber-jack whose knowledge of the ways of gold were infinitely less than his imaginings; here came men of most sorts and ages, lightly and sensibly equipped or heavily

and ridiculously encumbered. Many went away, disgusted and disappointed; many stayed; many more came after them.

An old man named Roberts made a strike three miles above the Goblet and news of it drew a scurry after him. Another, a negro from no man knew where, found colour and rich promise in a tributary of the upper river not a quarter of a mile from Boom Town. Roberts sold out the first day to a cool stranger from Reno, joyous with five thousand dollars. Other claims reported success and Boom Town was not only born but assured of lusty life.

Where there was a little open flat these men builded their town. The forest ranger, a leathery, quick eyed fellow named Greene, informed them that they were on Uncle Samuel's land and cautioned them against the destruction of the big, upstanding timber. So the brush was cleared here and there, a few saplings went down under swinging axes and the taller trees remained looking down upon the strange houses which grew up at their bases. There was to be little enough discussion as to just what spot Boom Town was to honour and disfigure with its presence; haste commanded that that site be merely the most convenient.

From the neighbouring mills came six horse teams, mounting circuitously and laboriously, bringing lumber over roads which were in the making under the slow turning wheels of the big wagons, the teamsters turning this way and that to avoid rocks and trees, coming up over the ridge from the south. In an almost incredibly short time Boom Town had its store, a long,

low, rough-board shack with a sturdy roof bespeaking its owner's intention to return to his mart after the passing of the coming winter: necessary articles and provisions went over a fresh pine counter demanding and getting those prices which men do not question in a mining camp. Bradshaw was the storekeeper's name; no one knew him or of him. He, like all other necessities for communal existence, seemed to have materialized at Boom Town's need.

Through the trees was a crooked, brush-cleared track which was called a street, and facing the store another squat building went up wherein, long before roof or walls were completed, much whiskey was dispensed by Flash Truitt and his aide. The floor was the main thing here, it appeared, and true enough, while the Boom Town Saloon was still noisy with hammer and saw a fiddler and an accordeon player had arrived and the new settlement had its dance hall, a place destined to win much ill fame as days went by and more men and women came.

The men of the mountains in the Thunder River country have been always hard men, will always be hard men until the earth has given up its final fleck of yellow metal and the last of the big timber has gone down under a vigorous attack, men who worked hard and played hard, who were violent in wrath, scarcely less than violent in their amusements. And, always and always, those who come first to the shout of gold are the restless spirits, the adventurers of these later days, those many types which are one in their disregard of convention and their contempt for the orderly exist-

ence prescribed "outside." So Boom Town, from the first day, was quite what was to be expected . . . perhaps the single epithet "boisterous" befits it as well as any other. Little isolated clump of humanity as it was, straggled far out of the way of cities, shut in by the silences of mountain and forest, composed of unsightly houses and tattered tents, with here and there a clean, new, white interloper, it made a name for itself which reached out across the country far in advance of the names of Summit City and Indian City and Bear Town. Like an untoward youngster it commanded attention, thrusting itself noisily forward.

Where Jim Banks went there also went the law . . . theoretically. But from the beginning it was rather more than obvious that the sheriff was disposed to let Boom Town alone as long as it did not molest him. The new mining camp must be a law unto itself; so has it ever been, so perhaps will it always be. Banks came and looked on and went; he occasionally appeared among the throngs which congregated at the long bar and about the little tables of the saloon; he took a mild interest in games which ran high and in the open; he watched the dancers; he went his way thereafter. The law was violated, but with the common consent of the entire community; it seemed a slight and negligible thing here in the heart of the Sierra that down among city dwellers laws had been passed against gambling. Presently or in due course those laws would thrust their heads in here, demanding attention; until that time came, let the ball roll! It is safe to say that if Jim Banks were thinking of votes to be desired at the next

election he secured more than he lost by "attendin' to his own business."

And all this . . . and more . . . because Bill Steele had found gold. He had known that there was a rich vein uncovered in the cave which later came to be known as Steele's Cache and he had set men to work there. Then in due time and without haste, to test a theory and to quiet an eager curiosity, he did the other thing which gave colour to the rumour that he was here not merely to mine, but to "do somethin'" with Thunder River water power. He put his men to digging and constructing a monster flume above the Goblet to deflect the stream from its ancient rock bed, carrying it about the Goblet, letting it thunder back into the old channel just below. And, while men had wondered, he had constructed a big syphon, utilizing the only serviceable makeshift to be had within a radius of fifty miles, namely, many joints of stove pipe. With these and the services of a plumber brought for the job from White Rock, the syphon was built and Bill Steele, standing upon the rim of Hell's Goblet, watched the rock-pool being drained of its contents.

It was a long task and in despair of achieving anything through the flimsy joints of stove pipe, Steele had telephoned to San Francisco for more satisfactory material when his plumber, having resorted again to solder, informed him that his syphon was working "fine." Thereafter it was long before the great cup was emptied. But before his shipment had arrived from the city, Steele, making his way down the steep sides

of the Goblet, stood at last in the ooze and sand of the bottom. And when, after a few moments of groping elbow deep in the muck about his boots, he lifted his head and stood upright, it appeared to the men lining the rim above him that the bronze cheeks of Big Bill Steele had gone suddenly pale.

Five years ago, fishing above the Goblet, he had found in a shallow pool from which the summer stream was subsiding a small nugget of almost pure gold. It was worn very smooth, indicating countless years of water action. This had been one day, and the next, searching high and low for a vein, he had discovered the Cache. Then he had gone to Mexico. During the passing of the five years his theory had formed. And that theory had been merely that Thunder River, beating at its banks in its age-long fury, had torn out other bits of gold, had dragged them in its triumphant miserliness down into its breast, had hidden them and borne them . . . Where? Always had the vision of the Goblet risen to answer him; everything that the river found it carried downstream. Leaves and sticks it would whip out again, hurling them over the rim. If its raging spring torrents clutched at gold, nugget or fine particles, it would carry none of it beyond the Goblet, which thus was destined to become the hiding place of the wealth of Thunder River. There it would be safe through the centuries, from the day when these old mountains were young until the day when Bill Steele came.

And he had come, he had guessed the secret which Thunder River had hidden under its volleying roar, he

had emptied the Goblet. And now, as he looked up, men marked that even the face of Bill Steele had gone tense.

"Turk!" he shouted, as he saw Wilson's ruddy face among the others above him. "Come down here! Rice," as Turk's partner peered down after him, "get the men busy all along the flume, making sure it's safe. I don't want the water rushing back in here while I'm here."

Bill Rice obeyed wordlessly and withdrew his men, feeling just as they did, that they were being removed because Steele didn't care to be watched just now. Turk, his big hands upon the rope down which Steele had slid over the smooth, water-worn sides of the Goblet, made his swift descent.

"What's up?" he demanded. "Headin' for Chiny, Bill?"

"Know what you're standing on, Turk?" asked Steele quickly.

Turk looked disdainfully down at the sand and mud which had risen high about his boots. A particular man about his footwear was Turk Wilson, and these boots were not a week old.

"The damnedest, wettest slush I ever dropped into," he grunted disgustedly. "What's the game, anyway, Bill? If you was wantin' water power to do somethin' with . . ."

"You are standing," Steele told him sharply, "on solid gold, man! I don't know how deep it is, but by the Lord, I believe it's ten feet through! Figure it

out; the Goblet down here at the bottom is about twelve feet in diameter. Say the deposit is ten feet deep . . .

Turk very naturally stared at him, startled. Seeing the mud on Steele's arm, the seeming pebbles in his hand, Turk stooped and thrust down his own arm. He brought up a lump of some hard substance the size of a goose egg, which he rubbed against his overalls. And, as luck would have it, for not even Steele hoped that every rock in this giant's catch-all was precious, the lump in Turk's hand was shot through with soft, crumbling gold.

"Good Gawd!" whispered Turk. And had the men still been above, peering down, there would have been no doubt of his sudden pallour. His face went chalky white, his eyes bulged suddenly. It might have been a ghost and not gold that he was looking upon.

"Free gold!" cried Steele triumphantly. "Gold that doesn't even need to be mined. Why, old Thunder River has been mining it since Cain and Abel's time, piling it down here, hoarding it away. A man can scoop it up with a tin dipper."

Turk stared and nodded, stared and nodded.

"Yes, sir," he said shakily. "It's like that. In a tin dipper, by Gawd! . . . Let's tell ol' Bill Rice. . . ."

"There are pockets and broken veins of gold all through these mountains," Steele was saying thoughtfully. "The Little Giant picked up one of them that ran full blast all last year and now has pinched out as clean as a whistle. Thunder River found another and

has gouged at it and torn it loose and tumbled it down here. Where it's just waiting, ready to pack out; where all a man's got to do is come take it."

Turk lifted his frowning brows.

"Eh?" he said. "Come an' take it? An' with the tough crowd that's swarmin' all over Boom Town right now. . . . Why, Bill Steele, man, with this much clean gold layin' loose . . ."

He broke off abruptly. Steele's steady eyes met his unwinkingly.

"You've got the idea, Turk," he said quietly. "Also you've got a rifle in camp. There's a chance of my needing two men I can tie to. Crawl out now and get Rice to one side and talk with him. I want to look around a bit. I'll come up presently."

And when Turk, scrambling back up out of Hell's Goblet, heard a faint sound in the bushes on the further edge and, looking, saw nothing but a fleeing chipmunk, he scowled and grunted to himself:

"There you go, Turk, you ol' fool! Imaginin' things already."

And he promptly forgot both suspicion and chipmunk as he glanced at the nugget he was taking to stick under the eyes of Bill Rice.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIGHT

NOTHING worth the having is to be had without a striving which not unusually becomes strife; nothing worthy of being held is to be safeguarded without vigilance. Herein, platitudinous though the twin statements may sound, lies a basic reason why life itself is worth while. Grasp manfully and retain . . . they are commands laid upon him whose blood runs as nature wills it, red and strong. He is perhaps as happy a man as can be found who says, "All that I have is mine because I made it mine and have kept it mine."

At least, as the thickening dusk made its long shadows across the mountains, so Bill Steele was thinking. His be the error, if error there is; his be the blame for the calling up the shades of long laid platitudes. He squatted on his heels and smoked a contemplative pipe at the rim of the Goblet, thinking thoughts which pleased him.

Most of all he thought of Beatrice Corliss, of the girl and not the heiress, of the slim young body of her and the soft grey eyes rather than of the string of figures which might metamorphose themselves into high piled golden discs if she set her name under them, of the Beatrice who had cooked for him and laughed with him, not of her whom they called the Young Queen.

"I've poked fun at her, the Lord forgive me, long

enough," he mused. "Plunging Bobbie Carruthers was right, I guess; hiding your love from a girl is rather good sport for a while, but it grows monotonous, and half the fun is telling her, after all!"

With him there was no such room for debate as had perplexed her. He loved her and he asked himself no futile and foolish questions about the matter. He had come perilously close to adoring her that first day when he had teased her unmercifully; he had been coming closer all the time since. In the war he had waged against her he had had the better of her right along, largely, thought Bill Steele, "because I'm a lucky cuss," and she had been in his mind a right good little sport. If there had been no other reason for loving her, that was one. And after she had kept her word, had come to his camp, had immediately thereafter laid her plans for running him out of the country . . .

"There's only one girl in the world fit to wear your little shoes, Trixie, girl," muttered the platitudinous Bill Steele. (There was a young moon; the summer air was warm, fragrant and seductive; he had found a gold mine today; Beatrice had answered him over the telephone wire: In short, excuses galore were not lacking for a suddenly softened mood.)

To have and to hold . . . to have that for which he began to yearn with growing passion, to hold that which he had found today. At his side lying conveniently placed was his rifle. He glanced at it with thoughtful eyes, then back at the silver crescent of promise gleaming through the blackening fir tops. He was not a gunman, he did not fancy the time honoured

way of settling hot dispute with hotter lead. Neither was he a fool. There were men in camp whom he did not like and who did not like him. Embry, for one; Joe Banks, for two; Flash Truitt, for three. Three men who, upon the surface had little enough to do with one another but whom he distrusted in all that they did and seemed. It was camp talk that Embry and Truitt had never spoken a friendly word between them; it was further report that Embry and Jim Banks had broken off abruptly their former amicable relations. Steele shrugged and believed only what it pleased him to believe. And that was, very largely, that Embry was full of craft and malice.

Nor did Steele fancy that his new secret could remain his a half dozen hours. It did not need Bill Rice's report that his men had been wondering and talking and speculating; nor Turk's further report that in the late afternoon he had seen here and there knots of men discussing "something or other" in quiet eager voices. Given a heap of raw gold in the midst of blood-stirred gold seekers, and what was the answer? A rifle laid handy at Steele's side, a certain grim tightening of the muscles about Steele's jaws and eyes.

He accepted conditions and allowed his acceptance to be unhidden. In other words, he went and squatted over what was his, meaning to hold it. When dusk had passed and night had come, swift and black, Bill Rice relieved his employer and Steele went to eat and stroll through the camp. At the saloon he was not surprised that men's eyes followed him here and there nor that while knots of men and women stood about

talking their voices were not for him. The gaming tables were well nigh deserted; the two men behind the bar were busy. There was no sight to be had of Truitt nor of Embry.

He walked to the end of the long room and swung about, his eyes sweeping back and forth across the many faces which had turned toward him. He had no need to call for silence when he spoke.

"Fellows," he said quietly, "I found it today. You all know or have guessed it. Yes, Gold! Just how big a strike it may take some days to tell. But I imagine it's worth while. It lies out there in the bottom of the Goblet. It's mine. I'm going to keep it. It's not like any other pocket I ever saw or heard about; if you could get in there for an hour you'd make expenses for a year. Just the same sort of thing you could do if you could have a free swing in the mint. But it happens that it's a case of hands off both places."

It was very still in the room when he finished abruptly. Then, going swiftly to the bar, Steele threw down a handful of coins.

"The house drinks on me," he ordered, and went out.

"Just the same," he muttered as at last he set his back to Boom Town, "there are at least half a dozen men in that crowd that would tackle the mint if they had a half decent chance. Wonder where Embry is?"

From Boom Town, Steele went swiftly down to the flat where his own cabin stood. Walking back and forth in the cramped quarters was Ed Hurley, his eyes looking restless.

"Well?" he demanded sharply as Steele came in.

"Where's Turk Wilson?" asked Steele.

"Just left; I sent him out to the Goblet; was coming over myself in a few minutes."

Steele stood for a little, silently looking into Hurley's anxious eyes.

"Like your new job, Ed?" he asked lightly.

"No," blurted out Hurley, coming to a stop and frowning soberly. "I don't. I don't mind a scrap any more than the next fellow, I guess; but by Heaven, I do hate just waiting for it to be pulled off."

"So you think it's coming, too?"

"With all that money in plain sight?" grunted Hurley. "With men like Joe Embry and that tin horn Truitt and the ragtag and bobtail that hangs out at the dance . . . You know as well as I do, don't you, Bill?"

Steele's reply lay in his stepping to his bunk, tossing back a thin mattress and taking out an automatic forty-five. He glanced at the sun, slipped it into his pocket.

"If you run across Joe Embry in the dark," said Hurley, his hand for a moment on Steele's arm, "you just shoot first, Bill, and ask questions afterwards. After the way you did him up the other . . . Why, man, he could plug you, swear he did it in self-defence and then drag both Miss Corliss and me into court to testify to your having attacked him once before!"

"I know Joe Embry rather well, Ed," was the quiet rejoinder. "So well that I know that he isn't going to let a chance like tonight's slip by him. As usual he'll

keep in the background, of course. It's open and shut that he'll get some poor rummy half drunk and sick him on me and my gold, rounding Banks up, I suppose, to promise to let him skip the country. In that gang back there," and he jerked his head toward the dance hall, "he'd have little trouble scaring up a half dozen fools such as Joe Embry uses."

"I haven't a gun on me," said Hurley.

"I left my rifle at the Goblet. Come on."

Steele was rolling a couple of blankets to take with him, planning on a long night to be made as comfortable as possible, when Hurley remembered to mention that there had been a telephone call.

"From a man at Indian City," he explained. "Name of Carruthers. Wanted you as soon as you came in."

So Plunging Bobbie Carruthers had come. Sylvia and the Twins with him of course. Steele went to his telephone, got Indian City and in a moment had Carruthers at the other end of the line.

Hurley, paying scant attention to the half of the conversation allowed him, turned quickly when he heard his own name mentioned. But Steele gave no explanation. Presently he said good-bye to Carruthers and hung up, his eyes shining as he turned toward his new superintendent.

"I won't need you tonight, Ed," he said bluntly, offering no explanation. "You are to saddle a horse and report immediately at Indian City. To Carruthers."

"What for?" was the sharp demand for particulars.

"You're apt to be up against it here and if there should be anything doing I want to be on hand."

"I've got two good men already. The three of us can handle anything that pops here, old man. Besides it's absolutely necessary that I send a man to Carruthers immediately."

"What for?" asked Hurley again, belligerently.

"He'll give you your orders." Steele put out his hand suddenly, gripping Hurley's hard. "Good luck, Eddie. The best of luck!"

"But . . ." demurred Hurley.

Steele laughed his big, happy laugh, swept up his roll of blankets, pitched his grey hat to Hurley, snatched his friend's inconspicuous black one and went out, crying over his shoulder, "You can ask your questions of Carruthers."

The young moon went its serene, silvery way and was hanging somewhere over the distant expanse of the Pacific; the sky filled with brightening stars which palely lighted the mountain tops and left thick shadows in the cañons; Boom Town had long ago grown noisy and had danced and drunk and gone to sleep. Steele, sitting with his back to a rock, his pipe bowl guarded by his cupped hand, heard Turk's snoring at last joined by Bill Rice's. He had almost begun to believe that he had overestimated Joe Embry's implacability or his nerve, when his taut senses informed him of the near presence of others than himself and companions. Above the rushing sound of the river water through the great flume between him and the Goblet he had

heard a man's voice. There was some one just behind him, higher up the bank, and that some one had stumbled awkwardly and cursed thereafter.

"Drunk," muttered Steele, as his hand tightened about his rifle and he rose and turned, still keeping close to the rock against which he had leaned. "Embry has overdone it a little."

But there would be others than the one incautious man, and were they drunk? No; not if Embry were back of this play. Steele, crouching a little so as to be in the thickest of the shadows, moved quietly toward the spot where Turk was sleeping. But before he had taken three paces he guessed what they were up to up there and called out sharply:

"Turk! Bill! Look out!"

With the snap of his words, before either of the two sleeping men could start to his feet, there came a crashing in the brush on the steep bank above them, the sound of a leaping, thudding boulder, and Steele sprang back again, again shouting his warning. And then there were quick muffled cries, the sound of other brush cracking and snapping, the smashing of timbers as a rock which more than one pair of hands must have struggled with to set it in motion tore into the flume, the black blur of another boulder bounding by him, come from the gloom, gone into the gloom . . . and a great wrathful cry from Turk:

"My leg. They're broke my leg. By Gawd . . . where's my rifle?"

"Back that way!" shouted Steele. "Can you walk, Turk?"

"Walk, hell!" came Turk's shaking voice. "I can't move . . . Where's my gun? Where . . ."

The snap and spurt of Bill Rice's rifle . . . flame and report from Steele's like an echo . . . two shots from above. And Turk cursing and seeking his gun in the dark, lying on the ground, his leg broken, an ugly rain of crashing boulders about him . . .

For Steele to go to Turk was like crossing some violent stream of death. And yet he did go, and went unharmed and found Turk's shoulders just as the groping hands found the rifle on the ground. While Bill Rice stood up and pumped lead into the shadows from which other lead was pumped back at him, Steele dragged Turk Wilson a dozen paces, letting him sink down in the shelter of a protecting boulder. Where Turk promptly fainted.

For a little Steele held his fire. In a moment his frowning eyes found Bill Rice's heavy form close at hand; Rice, too, was reserving his fire now, watching grimly for a definite target. Steele drew him back a couple of paces, saying in his ear:

"Let 'em guess a while, Bill. Back here where Turk is their boulders can't reach us. Then . . ."

Then there came from the other side of the canon a spurt of fire, a snarling report which reverberated between the rocky walls, and a bullet flattened against the boulder under which Turk lay.

"Taking us on both sides, eh?" grunted Steele. "If there ever was a play earmarked all over as an Embry product, it's this one. . . . Save your lead, Bill. Those jaspers are either just trying to scare us out or

they are plain fools. You couldn't hit an elephant at this distance tonight."

Rice was on his knees, bending over the prone body of his old friend.

"Dead," he said, and his voice was strangely quiet, "or fainted. If they got you, Turk, by God I'll get a man or two of them for you."

He got up and went to the flume, careless of the bullets which his action might draw to him, filled his hat and came back, wetting Turk's face and wrists. In a moment Steele heard a little chuckle from him. Turk had stirred and cursed and demanded again to be told where his rifle was. It was promptly slipped into his hand and Rice returned to Steele's side.

"He's all right," he said positively. "Can't kill old Turk that easy. Now, let's give 'em hell, Bill."

Fighting in the dark is uncertain work at best. And when a man attacked does not know who the attacker is or how many there are of him the demand to know just that becomes insistent, imperative. With a poor drunken fool who was also, perhaps, a mere tool, Steele felt that he had no quarrel. If he could only know if this were Joe Embry's work, if perhaps Joe Embry himself held to the background, watching, directing, taking but slim chances and reaping what good might come to him?

"All we got to do," Rice was growling, "is bust the flume back there, turn the water back into the hole an' then go get 'em, Bill!"

"And do the same thing every night as long as they want to take a wallop at us?" returned Steele. "That

would be making a concession, Bill, and we'll show them a thing or two first."

For a little the night had been quiet, its serenity unbroken. Now came a shot again from across the canon. As though it were the signal for renewed activity other boulders came bounding down from the bank above the defenders, other rifles barked and spat flame and lead. And Steele formed a theory.

It was that the man across the ravine was signalling, that he was the one who directed, hence that he was none other than Joe Embry. Joe Embry at the safer distance, watching his tools take his chances for him.

"You'd think they'd hear us up to Boom Town," muttered Rice.

But he realized as he spoke that there was little likelihood of that; situated otherwise this din in the night might have carried twice the distance to Boom Town. But here, with the roar and boom and thunder of the river making a thousand echoes in its rocky gorge, nothing less than a cannon shot could penetrate through the deafening clamour.

"I'd give a half interest in the Royal Flush to catch Joe Embry with the goods on!" Steele was saying thoughtfully.

The rifle across the cañon answered him. Yes, there was just one man over there. He guessed roughly that there were half a dozen on the bank under which he and Rice crouched, under which Turk lay, his gun nestled against his fiery cheek.

Bill Steele with savage hunger in his eyes stared across the black gorge; he wanted to be over there. •

And yet there was but one man on that side, there were several here, and he was no man to leave Turk and Rice to the heavier odds.

"If I could only get my hands on Joe Embry," were the words beating in his brain. "Joe Embry with the goods on."

"Help me get Turk back toward the head of the flume," he said to Rice, always with Joe Embry in mind. "We can cover the Goblet from there. And, if we have to, then we can knock out a board or two and let enough water into the Goblet to put a stop to their funny business."

The sensible thing to do, agreed Rice. And Turk, though he fairly whimpered with rage because he had had no satisfactory target given him as yet, agreed to be moved. Half dragging, half carrying the wounded man and yet very gentle with him, they slowly covered the hundred paces to the point where Steele decided they were to make their stand.

"Just keep still and you'll keep them guessing," he said quietly. "I don't think their stray bullets can find you here and I don't believe they'll tackle the Goblet until they get the signal from the other side. Which," grimly, "they are not going to get at all."

He put his rifle into the hands of the wondering Bill Rice and was gone in the darkness, slipping down into the emptied bed of the stream.

"He thinks it's Embry over there," Rice muttered in Turk's ear. "Most likely he's goin' to get him. How's the leg, pardner?"

"Fine," growled Turk savagely. "A smashed leg always is. Turn me over a little, Bill, so's I can get a chaw; it's in my tail pocket."

Steele, seeking to move quietly, gripping the rocks with both hands, searching here and there in the pitch dark for toe hold, made his way slowly and painfully down into the river's bed. Save for the rushing of the confined water in the flume now above him all was still again. Not even the lone rifle broke the silence.

Only when he felt underfoot the thin trickle which still marked the old water course did he know that he had come to the bottom, and relax his grip on the sheer bank. He took the automatic from his pocket, thrusting it into his trousers band. Then began the slow climbing up on the other side.

At last, after many a half slip, after many a pause as he unwittingly sent a cascade of noisy stones rattling down behind him, he came to the top of the southern bank, bringing his head up slowly, staring with baffled eyes into the thick shadows before him. He planned to come upon Embry from above, it being his thought that the lone rifleman was still opposite the Goblet. But in utter darkness nothing is certain but uncertainty; Embry might have heard his approach, might have guessed at it, might be not ten steps away now with rifle butt at shoulder.

Well, a man must take his chance when it is offered him, and Bill Steele drew himself up, his gun at last in his hand. For a moment he stood, listening. Then there came to his eager ears the snap of a rifle, the

spurt of flame cut through the void of night, and he knew that the man he sought was still keeping his place opposite the Goblet.

Again came the rattle of rifle shots from across the cañon, two stabbing flashes showing him where Turk and Rice were and that they had fired back at the vague targets suggested by those other flashes. Steele hurried on.

Presently, having made a slight detour so as to come upon Embry with sudden unexpectedness from behind, he stopped once more, straining his eyes to make out just what was that darker-than-darkness blur before him. It was a man, a man not ten feet from him, a man shooting as fast as his hand could work the lever of an old 30-30 Winchester . . . and no longer was he firing across the river bed. Steele heard the whine of a flying bullet, another and another, knew that death rode upon every leaden pellet and sought him desperately, whipped up his own gun in front of him and answered shot for shot. That two men should stand up and fire this way, so short a distance between them, and that either should fire the third and the fourth time seemed incredible. And yet, as he had said before, it was all guess work on a night like this, guess work and chance.

For, after the first shot, the other man had leaped to one side and there was only the flash from his gun barrel to locate him; after his own first shot Steele had moved to the right, stepping softly, and foreseeing that the man he hungered to get his hands upon would be doing the same thing.

"We could whang away like this all night," he muttered to himself, "and nobody get hurt. If the luck ran that way."

But luck ran otherwise. The rifle spoke, the automatic answered it and there came a sharp cry of pain and the sound of the rifle clattering down among the stones. His gun clubbed in his uplifted hand Steele sprang forward.

"Damn you, Embry," he cried out as his body hurtled into that other body and the two went down together, struggling. "I've got you, got you dead to right. Lie still or, so help me, I'll kill you now!"

And, so sure was he that this was Joe Embry, the sharp retort coming from another man angered him and disappointed him so that of the two emotions he did not know which was the keener:

"Embry, hell! I'm Banks, the sheriff, coming to stop this monkey business. And you're got to answer, Bill Steele, for shooting an officer of the law. Get off my arm, can't you?"

Steele rolled free but his hand maintained a relentless grip on Banks' unwounded arm.

"So it's you, Jim Banks, is it?" he grunted. "And you've gone clean bad, have you?"

"Bad?" snapped the sheriff. "I tell you . . ."

"You do the natural thing and try to lie out of it," cut in Steele coolly. "You are nothing but Joe Embry's yellow dog and I know it."

"I'll run you in for this, Steele," cursed Banks, sitting up and nursing a bleeding arm. "You can do all the guessing you want to to the judge."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," retorted Steele sharply. "You feel like it right now but tomorrow is another day. For one thing, I don't think that Embry'd let you get that raw. He's a trifle too smooth for that sort of a play."

"Embry be damned. I don't take orders off him."

"But you do. Ordinarily. Right now you take them from me. Call to those jaspers over there to run for it while the way is open; will you? They've hurt one of my men and I want to take care of him."

"I just heard the shooting," growled Banks. "And come down here to stop it . . ."

Steele laughed understandingly.

"Sure you did! Well, stop them now, why don't you?"

And when Jim Banks gave over to cursing again and to binding up the flesh wound in his arm, it was Steele who shouted out mightily:

"Hey, you poor boobs over there! I've got Banks all sewed up and he says you'd better be getting back to bed before we find out just whose beds are empty tonight! Scat!"

And sweeping up Banks' rifle he sent a couple of shots in the wake of his words.

"Rice!" he called then, and when Rice answered: "Knock out a board after all and let a little water into the Goblet. We're going to get Turk to my cabin and have a doctor on the way before morning."

"Curse the luck," Banks was saying heavily, "can't you see it's a mistake, Steele? Can't you see how it is? I heard the shooting . . ."

And, cutting into his hesitant speech there came abruptly the unsteady shout from the drunken and incautious member of the gang:

"Is that right, Jim? Has he got you? I'll come over an' beat his ol' head off'n his ol' shoulders . . . y'know me, Jim, ol' boy . . ."

His words broke off as abruptly as they had begun; some one had slapped a heavy hand across a foolish mouth.

But they all had heard, Turk and Rice down by the flume, Steele and Jim Banks himself here. Sternly and yet not altogether unkindly, his hand shifting to Banks' shoulder, Steele said:

"And time was when you were a square man, Jim. Don't you know this sort of business won't get you anywhere? You poor damned fool."

And Jim Banks, ridden hard by the emotions which only he knew of, his arm shot through with an agony of pain, allowed to be whipped from his white lips the words he would retract in another moment:

"I can't help myself! Joe's got the strangle hold on me. Some day I'll . . ."

But, suddenly realizing what he was saying, he shut his mouth savagely and took counsel with himself.

CHAPTER XXII

JOE EMBRY'S HAND

WITH Steele in his cabin were Rice and Turk Wilson. Jim Banks after the one outburst had maintained stoutly that he had appeared on the scene of action tonight merely because he had heard rifle shots and because it was his sworn duty to keep the peace. That when Steele had come upon him from the rear he had supposed he was one of the gang trying to rob the Goblet.

"You lie so well," Steele had said contemptuously, "that we'd have no case against you in court. Good night, Jim."

Now his one interest lay in Turk Wilson. There were ten feet of water covering his gold and he could forget the Goblet for the rest of the night. He turned from Turk, who lay white and silent on the cabin bunk, and picked up his telephone, ringing Indian City and curtly asking for Mr. Carruthers.

"Hello, Bob; this is Steele," he announced when, after ten minutes' delay he heard Carruthers' sleepy voice at the other end of the line. "You said Dr. Gilchrist was in camp, didn't you? Well, I want him to come over right away . . . Oh, I know. But listen, Bob. It's a case of a friend of mine pretty badly hurt and in my fight. Yes, we've had a little shindy over here; remember Embry? He's at the bottom of it.

Gilchrist will have to make the trip whether he's tired or not if he's any sort of a man. . . . Yes, horseback. Get Ed Hurley to ride with him to show him the way; hate to bother Ed so soon but . . . *What!*"

For Carruthers had told him that though they had been expecting Hurley all night he hadn't put in an appearance.

"That's infernally strange," muttered Steele wonderingly. "I don't understand . . . Well, in the meantime get Gilchrist started this way. You can scare up one of the men over there who can pilot him. So long."

And he clicked up the receiver and stood staring at it with frowning eyes.

"Hurley ought to have been there hours ago," he told himself, puzzled to find the reason for his loitering. "I told him to hurry."

He shrugged his shoulders and went back to Turk's side. Hurley could take care of himself and no doubt in the morning there'd be a simple enough explanation forthcoming. Right now Turk's very considerable suffering was the one thing that mattered.

They had cut away the right leg of Turk's overalls, man's way always of getting to a wound, and found the limb bruised, cut and swollen. Whether the bone was crushed neither Steele nor Rice was positive; Turk, for his part, assured them sulphurously that it was busted an' smashed all to hell. They bathed it and bandaged it and gave Turk a big drink of whiskey, thereafter waiting impatiently for the coming of Dr. Gilchrist. And when he found himself with nothing

to do but smoke his pipe and look at Turk, Steele found also that he was pondering a good deal more upon Ed Hurley's strange behaviour than upon that of Embry or Banks. Hurley wasn't the man to ignore a direct order like this . . .

"I'm going down to the meadow where the horses are," he said suddenly. "I want to see if Ed took one of them."

"Take your gun then," advised Rice briefly, "and look out for skunks; the woods is full of 'em lately."

Steele nodded his understanding, pocketed his automatic freshly filled, and went out. In the little pasture, though he searched half an hour, he found neither Hurley's horse nor his own. Here was fresh food for perplexity.

"Looks as though he took both of them," he pondered. "He wouldn't do that."

A faint sound which at first he could not locate brought him to an abrupt halt. A man's voice, he thought, coming from a distance, barely audible? Was it, perchance, Hurley calling?

It came again and he knew now, a low moaning as of a man in great bodily pain. And the voice came from out yonder somewhere toward the centre of the meadow. . . .

He found him a moment later. It was Ed Hurley, lying on his back, Steele's old grey hat on the ground beside him.

"Ed!" cried Steele, going down on his knees. "Ed, old man! What's wrong?"

But he knew before Hurley answered weakly what was wrong. His hands had gone out, touched Hurley's body and one of them had come away wet and . . . sticky. . . . It was a flying bullet from the fight at the Goblet gone wildly astray . . . No; it couldn't be that; Ed should have been at Indian City long before the firing began.

"I've got two holes in me, Billy," said Hurley faintly as, with his friend's arm about him, he half sat up. "I rather guess I'm done for. . . . I'm thirsty, Bill . . ."

A lump was in Steele's throat, a burning, searing rage in his heart. They had shot poor old Ed Hurley down like a dog, and why? Just because he was a friend of Bill Steele, just because . . .

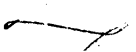
"He thought I was you," whispered Hurley. "Your hat, you know. . . . Your horse; couldn't find mine. Broke away I guess. . . . Get me a drink, will you, Bill?"

Steele ran down to the river, stumbling through the darkness, filled his hat and ran back, cursing Joe Embry at every step he took. When Hurley had drunk eagerly and sank back, Steele put his two arms about him.

"It's not all over with you, Eddie," he said softly. "I won't let it be. And, what's more, *she* won't let it be!"

"*She?*" demanded Hurley, wondering.

"That's why I wouldn't let you in on the fight tonight," Steele told him swiftly. "I was sending you



to Indian city to . . . Rose! To Rose and little Eddie. They're there; they're as good as well; Dr. Gilchrist . . ."

But Hurley had gripped him hard with both hands, was again sitting up, muttering:

"Rose, here! And Eddie!"

"They'll be here as fast as they can come," cried Steele. "They are in Indian City; were going to surprise you. Dr. Gilchrist came up with them and Bobbie Carruthers and Sylvia. You just lie still a minute . . ."

With great running strides he was back at the cabin, jerking the door open, calling to Bill Rice to come with him. And borne tenderly between the two of them Ed Hurley, white faced and unconscious, made the short trip to the bunk across the room from Turk's.

When this second wounded man had been given the rough and feady first aid understood by Steele and Rice, Steele went again to his telephone. Learning that Dr. Gilchrist had already left, he told Carruthers of Hurley's condition; he had found that Hurley had a severe but not dangerous wound in the thigh, and another of more threatening nature in the side. Hurley had lost a lot of blood, but unless he was bleeding internally that was stopped now. And if Rose could come . . .

As he left the telephone and came back to Hurley's side Steele's eyes met a pair of eyes lifted to his questioningly; not only had consciousness come back to the wounded man, but with it understanding of what had been said. Steele nodded at him reassuringly.

"She's coming, Eddie, old man," he said gently. "Rose will be here before you know it."

Whereupon Hurley sighed and closed his eyes again and lay still, seeking to hold what strength was still in him against the coming of his wife. He wanted to ask if she were bringing Eddie with her . . . but of course she wouldn't on a night like this . . .

"Joe Embry got him," Steele explained softly to Rice and Turk. "Thought he was getting me. Hurley had my hat on, put on my coat before he left the shack here, went down and saddled my horse."

Bill Rice nodded slowly, his eyes dark with rage.

"Hurley's bad hurt," he said softly, guarding his words from his former employer's ears. "I don't believe he's goin' to stick it out until she comes. . . . Sure it was Embry, Bill?"

"That's the hell of it all!" cried Steele, his two big fists going white as they lay on his lap. "I'm not sure of anything! But who else could it be?"

"I wish," murmured Turk plantively, "that I knowed who rolled that rock on my legs! . . . Give me another shot of hooch, one of you two Bills, will you?"

A long night for Steele and Rice, held in anxious inaction; for Turk Wilson whose injured leg pained him sorely; and for Ed Hurley an eternity to drag heavily by before the first light of a pale dawn. He had set himself the task of living and retaining full consciousness until Rose came to him . . . Rose and, possibly, little Eddie. Manfully he sought to shut out of his heart all bitterness at the thought that it might be that

as they came triumphant from their long fight with their dreadful sickness, triumphant because of the goodness of God and the skill of Dr. Gilchrist, he was to be drawn from them into the dread shadow from which they were emerging. This he struggled to ignore, filling his mind with thoughts of his wife and little boy won back to health, seeking through the hours of waiting to picture them as they would look now.

He shook his head when Steele asked softly if he were suffering unbearably; he nodded when water was proffered him; he spoke not at all, harbouring his strength, until his ears heard the faint drumming of horses' hoofs. Then he drew Steele toward him with a look and said quietly:

"They're coming! . . . I wanted to tell you first; I think it was Embry that got me. Can't swear to it, but some one shot twice and as I went down said, 'Damn you, Steele; take that to hell with you.' Couldn't make him out but his voice . . . sounded like Embry's. . . . Prop me up a little now, Bill. I want to see her when she comes in."

But it was Dr. Gilchrist, not Rose Hurley. A quick eyed, nervous looking man of middle age, who while setting down his bag and jerking off his coat was commanding a basin of water and another lamp lighted if they had one.

"Now," he said briskly, "who's needing me first?"

Steele pointed to Ed Hurley's bunk and for a moment turned away, staring out into a world of pale light and thinning shadows, thinking regretfully how, just to save Ed to Rose and Eddie he had sent him out to

take his own place before a cowardly attack. Then, his lips set in a hard and whitening line, he swung about again, his eyes clinging to the physician's face.

But the face of Dr. Gilchrist told nothing. With steady, sure fingers he made his examination in a silence so profound that the breathing of the men who watched him sounded unnaturally harsh. Presently he straightened up and with puckered brows turned to Turk Wilson.

"Is Rose coming?" asked Hurley anxiously. "Will I stick it out until she gets here?"

"Where are *you* hurt?" Gilchrist was demanding of Turk. "Leg, eh? Hurts, does it? Well, I guess it does! No; bone's all right but . . . What the devil have you fellows been up to anyway? Soon as you hear there is a doctor in twenty miles of you you go to doing this sort of thing, do you?"

Hurley sank back with a sigh and closed his eyes. But he opened them a few minutes later, turned them pleadingly to Steele. There were other hammering hoofs out there, bringing their message through the brightening dawn . . . bringing Rose?

Steele, understanding, went to the door. But Gilchrist was before him.

"I want a word with Mrs. Hurley first," he said sharply. And Steele gave way for him, coming back to Hurley's side.

Then came Rose Hurley, a little, thin wisp of a girl-woman with great shining eyes in which the tears already stood. And seeing no man of them all save the one who lifted himself and held out his arms and called

huskily to her, she ran to him and went down on her knees and put her two arms about him, whispering over and over in his ear:

“You are going to get well, Eddie. You are going to be all right! Dr. Gilchrist told me . . . he wanted me to be the first one to tell you . . . and he is the most wonderful man in the world . . . except my dear Boy Eddie. . . . And look, Eddie; look!”

Little Eddie Hurley, six years old, stared about him with the wondering eyes of six. Gravely he came forward to his mother's side.

“Are you my daddy?” he asked. And when a little joyous cry from the wounded man assured him that he was and a freed arm went out toward him, Eddie Hurley, Junior, offered the little rosebud of his mouth to be kissed by his father. And with their arms about one another Hurley and Rose and little Eddie were drawn very close together.

Steele, swinging about swiftly, went outside. As he went the roughened back of his big hand was drawn across his eyes . . . he had seen that Bill Rice had turned his back and was picking with a big fingernail at a splinter of the wall while Turk was suddenly taken with the imperious desire to give all of his attention to the carving of a generous cut of tobacco from his plug.

“Sure he'll get well,” chuckled Dr. Gilchrist. “I'm not saying that it isn't a close squeak; I'm not saying that he'd make the raffle if I wasn't here to lend a hand; but most of all, Mr. Steele, I'm not saying that he'd

live through it if Rose Hurley wasn't his wife! That little woman . . . why, man alive, with all the fight she's got in that little body of hers, she won't let him die! Not even if he wanted to. . . . Got any bacon and coffee? Haven't had an appetite like this for ten years!"

CHAPTER XXIII

AN OPTION ON SUMMIT CITY

BOB CARRUTHERS had come with Rose Hurley from Indian City, carrying little Eddie on the saddle in front of him. Having dropped back to give place to Hurley's wife and son as they hurried into the cabin, he now came up to join Steele and Dr. Gilchrist.

"So you are fighting about something or other again, are you, Billy?" he asked as his proffered hand was gripped hard. "Just what's the trouble?"

Steele sketched the situation briefly, Carruthers and Gilchrist hearing him through without comment. At the end the doctor said in his brisk way:

"My hospital might prove convenient in more than one way, eh, Mr. Carruthers? If this is the sort of thing to be expected along with the birth throes of new towns. Now, if Mr. Steele will oblige us by arranging for a man's size breakfast, I'll go inside again and give my attention to Mrs. Hurley's husband while the famous meal is in preparation."

Since here of late Steele had been taking his meals at the new lunch counter at Boom Town and there was nothing to eat at the cabin, he and Carruthers strode away together to the settlement, undertaking to bring back a hot breakfast with them. While they took their coffee and bacon and "stacks o' wheats," sitting upon high stools on the so-called street, the

bustling cook prepared the generously supplied platters they were to carry back to the cabin with them.

Dr. Gilchrist had assured them that Ed Hurley, though badly hurt, would come through it alive and, ultimately, as good as new; Steele, a good deal shaken because of Hurley's injuries and the part he himself had innocently played in the matter, wanted to be further assured that Dr. Gilchrist could be trusted utterly in his decision. Carruthers, playing Oliver Twist not only to his coffee but the whole breakfast, waxed enthusiastic upon the physician's extraordinary ability.

Gilchrist was a friend of Carruthers' father, an old college mate, a friend of young Carruthers himself, adored by Sylvia and further distinguished by the unqualified endorsement of the Twins. He was a man who, Carruthers devoutly believed, could accomplish anything he set his hand to. Why, look at Rose and Eddie Hurley! Gilchrist had taken a keen interest in them, had made them what they were this morning from doomed people of a year ago. That interest and its natural outgrowth and a theory of the doctor's were responsible for the good fortune of his being on hand now. He had another sanatorium down in Southern California; he maintained that these two of his patients had graduated from it; he argued that with proper care they would progress safely and rapidly into perfect, rugged health; he held himself responsible for another sanatorium to which such "graduates" as they should go. The climatic conditions of Southern California was indicated for certain of his patients; the

rarer, bracing and flawlessly clean air of the Sierra was the thing now for Rose and Eddie and others of his big and ever growing "family."

"You heard him mention his hospital? He came along with us and Mrs. Hurley, planning a good deal less on a much needed vacation for himself than upon selecting a site here for an extension of his treatment. Told me all about it on the way up. He will put up first a big hospital building, then, close by yet sufficiently removed to give privacy and a certain air of homelike independence, a number of cottages. Here, in the spring and summer months, he will personally oversee his work. He is tremendously enthusiastic over it; especially since he got up into the mountains. Says that the very ruggedness of the outlook itself will do a lot psychologically."

"Good business," agreed Steele heartily. "I wish him luck with it."

"As a matter of fact," smiled Carruthers, "his enthusiasm over it all is so great that he begrudges the time necessary for purchase of site and erection of buildings before he can get under way, matters that will hold him up until next summer, while he'd like to roll his sleeves up tomorrow. . . . By Jove, Billy, this is *some* coffee, eh? First time I've had three cups since . . ."

"Since the Twins were born? How's Sylvia?"

From the lunch counter, each carrying his share of hot coffee and bacon and bread and butter and whatever else the cook could suggest or they could see in his larder, they returned to the cabin. Steele was still

too greatly concerned with Hurley's and Turk's condition to give thought as yet to the inspiration which a little later was to shape from Carruthers' words. And in the cabin, watching Rose Hurley with her hand locked in Ed's and her eyes always on his, he had in his mind room only for thoughts of the way in which human destiny worked forward to the unguessed end, how little events and big shaped themselves into Fate that Fate in turn might become Providence; how, in its way, Rose's sickness was now responsible for the presence here of Dr. Gilchrist in Ed Hurley's time of sorest need.

"Ed'll pull through," he said to himself with firm conviction, "just because it is meant that he should."

Later when Turk, at his own request, was moved to a tent in order to give the cabin over to the Hurleys, and when Dr. Gilchrist had come away leaving Rose as nurse in charge, Steele quieted all of his uneasiness over a pipe . . . and his inspiration blazed out upon him.

"By the Lord!" he cried suddenly, slapping his thigh resoundingly. "Just the thing!"

"What is?" demanded Dr. Gilchrist.

But Steele, shaping that which had started up in his mind, grew suddenly silent. As his eyes brightened his silence grew the more marked.

"Another little joke on the Queen!" was what he said finally as he went away to see Carruthers who was "looking over" the Goblet and the scene of last night's fight. Whereupon Dr. Gilchrist set him down as eccentric and forgot all about the matter.

"Do me a favour, will you, Bob?" he cried in the first burst of his enthusiasm.

"Sure," answered Carruthers. "Just what, though? Cut that man Embry's liver out or what?"

"I'm forgetting Joe Embry this morning," said Steele. "After all he is beginning to strike me as the kind who, given a sufficiently long rope, will make a hangman's noose out of it. No," and his eyes were dancing; "just a little matter of business. Run over and have a talk with Miss Corliss of the Thunder River ranch. Get an option on Summit City!"

"What do you want Summit City for?" wondered Carruthers. "Before we get done we'll have run that place clean out of business . . ."

"Which, being no fool, she knows as well as we do. Hence this is the psychological moment to open negotiations. You'll get an option now dirt cheap."

"But we don't want the blamed town . . ."

"You don't. But I do. Just for about twenty-four hours, Bob. And I'll turn it over to . . . Can't you guess?"

"No. Who'd want it?"

"Dr. Gilchrist!"

"Dr. Gilchrist? Buy a defunct village? What's gone wrong with you, Bill Steele?"

But Steele only chuckled and, chuckling, explained in full. Dr. Gilchrist hated to think of wasting the summer in building a hospital; well, then, let him take the Summit City inn, already built and with a little alteration admirably suited for the purpose. He wanted neat, cheerful cottages? Let him take them as they had

been built by Beatrice Corliss. Out of the world a bit? Not too far. They'd run a good road to Indian City, and in any case Gilchrist wanted to make this largely a summer sanatorium, didn't he? If Carruthers would just get the option, Steele would do the rest; he'd take Dr. Gilchrist to look the site over . . . and he'd close the deal before the day was out.

"I believe you could!" said Carruthers. "I believe you could, Bill. . . . Why don't you take it up with Miss Corliss yourself?"

Steele grinned.

"She'd call the royal body guard to drop me off the ranch," he chuckled. "She's my mortal enemy, you know, Bob. Wouldn't sell me a pin if I offered her a double eagle for it. Now go ahead, will you? You get the option in your name, never letting her suspect that you even know me, if you can help it. Then you turn it over to me and I'll deal with Gilchrist!"

But Carruthers was frowning.

"Look here, Bill," he said quietly. "Maybe you'll think me a fool and something of a sentimentalist; maybe I am since the Twins came," he admitted with the flicker of a smile. "But it sort of strikes me . . . Oh, well, I don't like the idea of holding Gilchrist up for so much as a penny. He's no money-maker; he doesn't try to make money out of his work. He'd lose a thousand dollars any day to make a cure. He is doing a big work for poor devils who need help and . . ."

"Whew!" whistled Steele. "Twins do make a difference, don't they?"

"Just the same . . ."

"Just the same," cut in Steele firmly. "I've asked a favour. If I want to put across a deal which the father of twins wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole he can simply say: 'I won't do what you ask.' That lets him out. It's up to you, Bob."

"Oh, well," said Carruthers. "I'll do it." He looked at Steele queerly. "You're not the man to go money mad, Bill."

"You never can tell," laughed Steele. "Now, I'll scare up a horse for you and you can make a call on Miss Corliss. Much obliged."

Whereupon he went away, followed by Carruthers' puzzled eyes.

Before noon Carruthers interviewed Beatrice. She admitted candidly at the outset that the change of railroad plans had been a severe blow to her hopes for Summit City and that she was, perforce, in a position to listen to an offer. Just how eager she was to save herself from a complete loss here she did not allow to appear; chiefly eager in the matter because she did not want that man Steele to be able to say that he had entirely succeeded in his threat to "put her little toy town out of business." Steele, by the way, was not mentioned during the transaction.

Carruthers had little difficulty in securing the option for ten days, the final figure agreed upon standing at twenty thousand dollars, and reported his success to Steele who was tremendously pleased.

"Good enough, Bob," he cried warmly, so warmly and with such a look of triumph in his eyes that again Carruthers was troubled to account for this new devel-

opment of the "money grabbing" instinct in Bill Steele, reckless spender aforetime. "She's losing a good deal at that and yet she figures she'd better lose a few thousands now than the whole shooting works later on. Let's see; her inn must have cost between seven and eight thousand, say seventy-five hundred. Then there are a dozen or more cottages, say a thousand dollars each as they stand. That's something over nineteen thousand there. Then there's the store, the post office building, to say nothing of the land the town stands on and Corliss Lake. At twenty thousand it's a pick-up, Bob. Now, where's Gilchrist?"

That afternoon Dr. Gilchrist, satisfied with the condition of Hurley and Turk and content to leave them to Mrs. Hurley and Bill Rice, was lured away from camp by Steele who "wanted to show him something." Never a hint of their destination or the purpose of their ride was forthcoming until they rode into Summit City.

"Neat little town, don't you think?" asked Steele carelessly.

Gilchrist, startled as were all newcomers to, come without warning upon this spick and span little settlement here in the heart of the wilderness, nodded his approval.

"Pretty," he said enthusiastically. "Down-right pretty, Steele. Not the sort of thing you'd look for here, eh?"

They rode along the street, to the crest of the hill whence they could overlook the little lake with its canoes and launches mirroring themselves like so many Narcissuses, turned and came back to the inn.

"Look at that, will you?" Steele flung out his arm in a wide sweeping gesture. "Notice how they're all outside rooms; how they catch the sun; how airy and cheerful and convenient it all is. A little alteration here and there and it would make first rate place for you, wouldn't it, Doctor?"

"Believe you're right," said Dr. Gilchrist, still with no glimpse of Steele's purpose. "May run over here for a couple of days if I get the time later on. Right now I'm going to be busy looking for my hospital site."

"And then drawing up plans, clearing land, making a road to it and putting up the building? All the summer gone and only half way to completion when the snows come and stop you. When the sensible thing . . ."

"Well?" queried Gilchrist as Steele paused abruptly.

"Is to take what lies all ready and at hand! All you've got to do here is wave your hand like a fairy's wand and here you've got Dr. Gilchrist's Sanatorium, ready for occupancy."

Gilchrist frowned and continued to stare.

"I mean it," laughed Steele. "I've got an option of the whole works, hotel, store, cottages, lake, everything. It's just the article for your purpose; you couldn't beat it if you took all year to look around. And it's ready. Ready for you to bring your patients into in a week!"

In a flash he had caught the physician's interest. In silence they made further investigations, Gilchrist going at last into the inn, while Steele waited with the

horses. In fifteen minutes the doctor came out, his face flushed a little, his eyes bright.

"It would be just the thing!" he announced confidently. "If only the price happens to be right, Mr. Steele."

"As I said," replied Steele, "I have an option on the place and that option calls for an expenditure of twenty thousand dollars only."

Gilchrist, no business man and no pretender at bargain driving, allowed himself to look his surprise.

"That certainly sounds ridiculously cheap," he admitted. "But of course," smilingly, "you'd not be selling at the same figure. I'd quite forgotten that part of it. Just how big a difference would there be, Mr. Steele, between your buying and selling price?"

"Just exactly ten thousand dollars!" returned Steele coolly.

Gilchrist's eyebrows went up.

"You are not doing business just for fun, are you, Mr. Steele?" he said a trifle coldly.

Gilchrist wondered at Bill Steele's sudden mirth, at his big, booming laughter. Certainly he had set the man down as eccentric, but . . .

"In this particular instance," cried Steele warmly, "that is just exactly what I am doing business for; just for fun! I said that the difference between my buying and selling price would be just ten thousand dollars, didn't I? Well, so it will. If you will just keep your mouth shut about what concerns just you and me . . . if you will take good care not to refute

any rumours which will get started real soon that I have sold to you at thirty thousand . . . well, then, I'll close the deal with you out of hand and you take Summit City . . . for ten thousand dollars!"

Eccentric . . . or simply stark, staring, raving mad?

"You mean that you offer to sell at a loss of ten thousand dollars?"

"With two provisos, yes. First that you use the property for a sanatorium. Second, that you let people think I got thirty thousand out of you."

"But I don't understand, Mr. Steele . . ."

Again Steele laughed at him joyously.

"I found a gold mine yesterday," he said lightly. "Also, I am in the way of making a lot of money with Carruthers. Besides, I'd be mighty glad to do my little bit to help in the good work you are doing, work such as has brought back Rose and little Eddie to Hurley. And besides . . . though you won't understand this, either! . . . it'll be worth something for the sake of another joke on Her Majesty the Queen! And finally, to get down to business I have made you an offer. Will you accept it?"

Of course Gilchrist accepted, warmly thanking Steele for his generosity. The details both were willing to wave aside for the present. But, asking Gilchrist to excuse him a moment, Steele went back to the post office, where he scrawled and mailed this letter to Beatrice:

"Poor dear little Queen Trix: It was Bill Steele himself who sent Carruthers to you. Bought Summit City for

\$20,000, tearfully realizing how much you were losing at that figure. Hating to hold the place, since it would always recall to me a sad little reverse for you, I am selling it immediately to Dr. Selwyn Gilchrist to be turned into a sanatorium. Regretfully,

“BILL.

“P. S.—Confidentially, and on my word of honor, the difference between buying and selling price by me is \$10,000. Nice, tidy little sum, eh, Trixie? Thanks for the opportunity.”/

CHAPTER XXIV

A MATTER OF LUCK

DR. GILCHRIST moved to Summit City without loss of time. Established there, his first act was to get into telegraphic communication with his aides in Southern California, his second to have Ed Hurley and Turk Wilson given sunny, comfortable rooms in the "inn" which was to be transformed without delay into a hospital, his third to close the deal with Bill Steele.

Beatrice Corliss, having irretrievably taken the first step in a transaction which galled her . . . she had Steele's note and visioned the laughter in Steele's teasing eyes . . . came promptly to Summit City to sign the necessary papers, abandoning all ownership of the town she had made and loved. Upon Bob Carruthers who perforce was on hand she bestowed a look of withering, ineffable scorn.

"Whew!" ejaculated Carruthers in a startled aside to his grinning friend Steele. "No wonder they call her the Queen! She thinks you are sticking her for ten thousand, does she? Better explain, Bill; she's got murder in her eye."

Beatrice's eyes had met Steele's in one flashing glance, eloquent of the contempt she meant that he should see there; then, head lifted, cheeks flushed, she passed by him and to the table where Dr. Gilchrist was seated with the papers in the case.

Gilchrist, for his part, both appeared and felt embarrassed and ill at ease. His was a position of accepting largely of Steele's generosity and in return allowing it to seem that the man who had been open-handedly munificent was even now triumphing in a bit of sharp business. Big hearted himself, Gilchrist had a moment ago allowed the Sacramento papers to write up the deal crediting Steele with a sweeping coup. That Steele himself had telephoned the misleading tip to Sacramento, while suspected by the physician, did not minimize his distaste for the deceit. So it was he, more than any one else, who fidgeted under Beatrice's cool look.

Steele, radiating his good humour as usual, presumed to make the introductions.

"Here's Trixie herself!" he cried pleasantly. "Looking as bright and happy as a lark. You've met Carruthers, I believe? He is interested with me in town building at Indian City and Bear Town. Didn't mention it to you, did he, when he called for the option! And this is Dr. Gilchrist. Doctor, my neighbour and very dear friend, Trixie Corliss. Known rather widely as the Young Queen."

"Fully appreciating the honour Mr. Steele does me," said Beatrice quickly at a moment whose equal for anger she had never known, "I do not care to accept his friendship. Since I wish to go as soon as possible shall we get the business over with, Dr. Gilchrist?"

"Mr. Steele here," floundered Dr. Gilchrist, "is a mighty fine man, Miss Corliss. I admire him immensely. I . . . I wish that . . ."

He broke off with a pleading look at Steele who only laughed joyously, tremendously pleased with his "joke" on the queen.

"He may be a little . . . shall we say *keen* in business matters," continued Gilchrist with a rather uncertain smile. "But . . ."

"You will pardon me if I am not interested in discussing the subject?" asked Beatrice stiffly.

"Read the Sacramento papers tomorrow," chuckled Steele. "Big business deals go forward in the Thunder River country . . . the well known Miss Corliss, famed for her business acumen, outdone by Bill Steele, mayor of Boom Town . . . Summit City, sold for twenty thousand dollars, resold immediately for thirty thousand . . . feverish real estate activity in the Sierra Nevada . . . new tourist towns promoted by the aforesaid Steele who has incurred the Corliss enmity and jealousy . . ."

"You brute!" cried Beatrice passionately, unable to restrain herself under his taunting. "You unthinkable brute! And if you think that I am through with you . . ."

She cut her words off, breathing quickly, for the second time looking straight into Steele's mirthful eyes, then turning her back on him.

A notary had been summoned and the business of the day was completed quickly. At a stroke of the pen Summit City was no longer hers but became Dr. Gilchrist's, having passed through the hands of Bill Steele.

"It's just as though you had made me a present

...” Steele was saying. But Beatrice was gone with a whisk of skirts, hurrying out to Parker and the waiting car.

Steele stared after her until she had gone from sight. Slowly the dancing lights were subdued in his eyes. He had begun to wonder if he wasn't a bit overdoing all this. He had told himself all along that she was “a good little sport” and that, in time, she'd come to laugh with him at their rivalry and her own little losses. But he must admit, and he did admit rather sombrely for him, that the looks she had given him today were no such looks as he would care to see when one day he came to her soberly and showed her just what, in the depth of his heart, was his thought of her. A moment ago he had planned to go to the post office and drop a note to her, saying as he had said before, “Never, mind, Trixie; what you lose now you'll get back. I'm just saving it all for you!” But, when at last Parker and the car and Beatrice had disappeared, the unthinkable thing which Bill Steele did was to sigh heavily.

“I'd better look out what I'm doing,” he admitted to himself thoughtfully. “The thing for me to do is begin making love. Real love, by the Lord, and no more funny monkey business. That's open and shut. And how in the name of Mike I'm going to do it when she won't even talk to me or let me talk to her, I don't know! I rather believe. . . . I'm damned sure of it! . . . I've been going at things backwards.”

He visited both Turk and Ed Hurley in their new quarters, chatted briefly with Rose, treated Eddie to

a ride on his big shoulders and looked in on Dr. Gilchrist. Having arranged after some insistence that the nurse, when she came, was to be paid by him, he left Summit City to return to the Goblet and the work to be done there. As he rode down through the silent woods, he was unusually thoughtful. And repeatedly he found himself sighing after a fashion which, could Beatrice have heard and understood, would have surprised her considerably and satisfied her infinitely.

At the Goblet there was much requiring to be done. A trustworthy crew of men had been selected by Bill Rice, acting foreman now that Hurley was incapacitated, and no time was being lost in waste effort. For the first time in many a day the mountains hereabouts saw an ore-laden wagon with a guard riding at the driver's side, rifle on knee, turn toward the railroad. And never had such ore gone out of the Thunder River country; it was, as Steele had said, as if the river itself had long ago turned miser and now its treasure box were being looted. Though the men employed in the big cup were paid such wages as they had never gotten before, Bill Rice was unremitting in his watchfulness over them; for it would have been a simple trick for a man to take from this cache in his overalls pocket raw gold that would have spelled high wages for many a month.

"Your luck's sure runnin' high these days, Steele," said Rice with a shake of the head. "Play her to the limit while she lasts. You can't lose right now."

As Steele went about his numerous duties those

words of Bill Rice, spoken with grave certainty, drummed continuously in his brain. His luck was running high! And it was; he had had the same thought himself. He couldn't lose right now. . . . He wondered!

"There is no such thing as luck," say the scientifically and mathematically inclined. And, scientifically and mathematically, they demonstrate their theorem utterly to their own satisfaction and that of their ilk.

"There is such a thing as luck," says the gambler. And, perchance, the gambler knows! For certainly it is his business, his chief affair in life, to know just this. The others, those gentlemen of logically minded research, are the hounds running after the rabbit for luncheon; he, often enough, is the rabbit running for his life.

"There is such a thing as Providence," says still another class. And the gambler is content to remark, "Well, the man who is selected for the bounty of Providence is sure in luck!"

Steele put in a day, after a fashion, not half as hilarious as Bill Rice as the ore continued to come up rich and full of promise. He went back and forth between the Goblet and his cabin many times, using his telephone frequently to keep in touch with all that was going forward at the two new towns at the ends of Sunrise Pass. But even the rarely observant Bill Rice noted that his employer seemed listless. . . .

At dark work shut down. Steele left Rice to post

a guard at the Goblet and went up to Boom Town and the lunch counter. Now and then a man came up to him as he ate and sought to enter conversation. But only too plainly Steele's thoughts were wandering far afield; he was saying that if there *were* such an element as luck, if it *were* behaving kindly toward him just now, why then, taking advantage of its fickle propitiousness he ought to jump on his horse, smash a record getting to the Thunder River ranch house, break in on the maiden meditations of Beatrice Corliss and demand to be loved.

Coal oil lamps and tallow candles stuck in bottles or jammed down tight on window sills were casting their pale yellow lights from the saloon windows when he pushed away his plate and filled his pipe. Swinging about on his stool, he watched the men crowding through the doorway, listened to the many voices of men congregating at the long bar or taking their place about the tables at the far end of the room or seeking partners for the dance. Already the accordeon player was hard at it; the fiddler was just finishing his supper and wiping his moustache, preparatory to joining his fellow music maker.

Steele, with his pipe going, left his stool and stepped out into the street, planning to return to the cabin. As he did so he saw Joe Embry push through the crowd at the saloon's door and go inside. It was the first time he had seen Embry since the trouble at the Goblet. In swift obedience to the natural impulse, Steele followed him. He had the wish to know just what look

would come into Embry's eyes when they two looked at each other.

Already, early as it was, there were many in the long room. The fiddler had joined his companion, the music was inspiring, dancing began immediately, big boots clumped noisily. Steele stepped close to the bar, to be out of the way of the dancers and saw Embry set down his glass and turn toward the door. Embry had not seen him and yet had turned quickly, a hand dropping in what looked like carelessness to his side. Flash Truitt, who had served him his liquor, reached out for the empty glass, his eyes on Steele.

Embry's gaze as usual was untroubled, clear. He had shown neither interest nor surprise at Steele's entrance. This Steele noted and, noting Truitt, also, suspected promptly that the gambler had in a quiet word prepared Embry for the coming of a man who might have a desire for trouble, a man who at the very least was Embry's enemy.

The mere sight of Embry outside had quickened Steele's pulse, sent a surge of hot anger to his heart. That he was now looking into the steady, unwinking eyes of the man who had caused Turk Wilson his lacerated leg and who had shot down Ed Hurley he had not the vaguest doubt in the world. And yet, as he came on, walking slowly, he kept his face expressionless and told himself that the things which he more than suspected were still all unproven.

He paused just a brief fragment of an instant at Embry's side, his eyes stern and enquiring. He saw

that Embry's hand at his hip was very still, that the fingers were tense. Then he passed on. At the far end of the bar he stopped again, this time calling for a cigar and carelessly collecting the change returned to him from a ten-dollar gold piece.

"Just lookin' 'em over, Mr. Steele?" said Truitt, who had come to serve him. "Or takin' a whirl at the wheel tonight?"

For as Steele stood he was looking toward the roulette table where a half dozen men were making "pikers'" bets or idly watching the speeding ivory ball.

Before replying Steele meditated upon a fact which seemed and perhaps was quite trifling: Truitt, on his way to get the box of cigars from a shelf under his counter opposite Embry, had had a quiet word with him. While upon the surface the two had not been friendly, Steele had imagined that their supposed dislike for each other was but a part of Embry's smooth work; he'd hardly care to let the impression go to Beatrice that he had anything in common with the man who managed the hateful saloon at Summit City. . And now just the look in Flash Truitt's eyes . . . Embry's were absolutely cold and noncommittal . . . told Steele that they might have a very great deal in common.

"Two of a kind, after all," he reflected.

He was taking his time in answering Truitt's question. Truitt's voice was evidently meant to be casual and careless . . . and it failed to ring true. Truitt's face, usually very pale, was slightly flushed; Truitt, who, like most gamblers, drank little, had broken his rule today. It seemed obvious that he wanted to see

Steele play roulette, and what need to seek for a reason for that? The more men to play, the bigger winnings for the house. That's what the wheel was there for.

"I'll watch her spin a while," said Steele coolly.

Truitt had turned toward Embry again. Embry, however, showed him only his back with his elbows hooked over the edge of the bar, seeming to give his attention entirely to the dancers out in the middle of the floor. He was turning a big black unlighted cigar slowly between his lips. Embry, of course, would like to see him lose just because . . .

A sudden thought brought a quick tensing of the muscles up and down Steele's big body! A sudden suspicion which, in a flash, was close to certainty; he wondered that it had never presented itself to him until now. Even now, if it had not been for the look he had surprised in Truitt's eyes when they went to Embry, he would not have thought of it. If he could but be sure!

He had knocked out his pipe and put it into his pocket. If he could just be sure! Slowly he cut the end of his cigar, slowly lighted it. Then, his change in his hand, he stepped to the roulette table and placed a bet. The nine dollars and a half which Truitt had returned to him he piled on number five.

He had no thought of winning, no desire to win. But he thought that he saw the way to have the answer to his question. The dealer, a small, quick-fingered man, lifted tired eyes briefly, dropped them under a pair of long, dark lashes and lazily watched the ball. The first burst of its wild racing over, it loitered, clicking and ever seeming about to stop, and at last came

to rest on number seventeen. No one had won; the dealer's hand raked in the chips with Steele's money and again set the ball circling.

"No luck?" laughed Truitt. "Maybe next time . . ."

Steele shrugged.

"I don't carry my pockets full of coin these days," he returned lightly. "It isn't always wise, you know."

"I'll advance you something," suggested Truitt. "Just give me your I O U."

Here was just what Steele had lost his nine dollars and a half for; this and something else. He had moved back a little from the table so that, looking at Truitt and beyond him, he saw Joe Embry's back in the looking glass behind the bar.

"Will you cash my check for a thousand dollars?" he said abruptly.

For a moment Flash Truitt hesitated. The amount was large and he knew little of the man who asked it, nothing of his financial rating. Men in towns like Boom Town have been known to give worthless checks. As this went through his mind, as Steele had known it must go, something else happened which Steele had more than half expected. Truitt's look had flashed again to Joe Embry. Watching the mirror, Steele saw that Embry had half turned, moving quickly as the words "a thousand dollars" fell on his ears, and that his answer to Truitt's enquiry was a positive nod.

"Certainly, Mr. Steele," Truitt was saying, as though the matter were of negligible importance. "Glad to cash your check."

Steele did not move, did not shift his eyes from the mirror. Truitt looked at him wonderingly, then swung about, looking whither Steele was looking. Joe Embry, too, turned. And in the long glass he saw reflected the face of Bill Steele, smiling grimly.

"If I lost the whole wad," said Steele distinctly, "it would be worth it; for I've found out something I would have paid more than that to know!"

For in his heart, as he had watched Embry in the glass, he had been asking himself:

"Is Joe Embry the man who gives Truitt his orders, who owns this dive and the dive in Summit City and the string through the mountains?"

And, as though in answer to his question, Embry himself had nodded!

CHAPTER XXV

THE JUDGMENT OF THE IVORY BALL

NOW there came to Bill Steele the hot desire to smash Joe Embry, smash him good and hard. Not for that which he had done to him, but for what he had done against Beatrice Corliss with that cursed place of evil of his in Summit City, which he had assured her was run by Steele himself. Soon or late he would get Joe Embry, and he dared think, with that hot rush of anger, that the time was now and in a way which Joe Embry did not look for. For again there came to him Bill Rice's words, his own thought of the afternoon: His luck, if there is such a thing as luck, was running high!

At Flash Truitt's word the dealer counted out to him from his shallow drawer fifty shining golden discs, each a twenty dollar piece. Steele, taking them silently, after having said curtly that he preferred the gold to the chips, was puzzled to know why he had not guessed long ago just the nature of the business which had kept Joe Embry here. The thing was so obvious, now that his suspicion had been awakened. All along he had merely accepted Embry's own explanation, that he was looking for timber investments, and had not troubled to note that not a single investment had been made.

"Running rotten dives is what he was cut out for," he grunted to himself. "And then trying to pass the buck to me!"

In another mood he might not have done the foolhardy thing he was doing tonight . . . and again he might. For always was he Bill Steele, who took his chances and was reckless with money. But now, assured that the "wheel" was straight for the simple reason that they would not have dared bring a crooked lay-out into a camp like this, he stood at the table, his money stacked in front of him, his hat pushed far back on his head, his eyes suddenly gone stern. If there were anything in a man's run of luck he meant to test it tonight.

"I'm not betting nickels this trip, pardner," he said quietly to the dealer. "What's your limit?"

Already there were a dozen men drawn up about the table, sensing the beginning of one of those games which are worth being watched. The dealer, measuring Steele gravely with a long, steady look, turned for instructions to Truitt, meanwhile clicking his chips softly.

"Take the roof off for him, Pete," directed Truitt.

"You hear him?" said the sober-faced dealer. "Bet 'em as high as you like, friend."

"If you don't mind," continued Steele, "I'd like to see what you've got in your cash box."

The dealer nonchalantly raised it to the table for Steele's counting. The drawer held in the neighbourhood of two thousand dollars yet. Steele laughed at him.

"I said, but I guessed you didn't hear me, that I wasn't betting nickels tonight."

The dealer removed the cash box, shrugging. Truitt came out from behind his bar, saw what was wanted and asked for a moment to straighten matters. Pushing his way through the ever growing knot of men, he went to the safe, which stood in plain sight at the end of the bar, coming back with a buckskin bag.

"Forty-five hundred more, friend," announced Pete, the dealer, when his lightning swift fingers had made the count and dropped the money in place. "Close to seven thousand in sight. Will that do you for a while?"

"For a beginning, yes. Truitt, you'd better telephone to some of Joe Embry's other gambling houses for some more money."

"Don't know what you mean, Embry's houses. . . ." Steele shrugged.

"Ask Embry, then. Also, you'd better give me a few more counters. Will you honour another check for a thousand?"

"Yes," retorted Truitt. "Write it."

Steele wrote, cashed it, and placed his first bet. The ivory ball was whizzing, the red and black and green sections of the table inviting him. Leaning forward, he put a stack of ten twenty-dollar pieces on the double-O.

Swift word went back and forth through the long room that Bill Steele, the man of Hell's Goblet, was bucking the bank; that he had placed his first bet of two hundred dollars; that he had bought two thousand

dollars of counters; that he had blood in his eye. Before the little white ball had come to rest the crowd looking on had doubled, jamming into a tight-packed throng, watching interestedly, held back a pace or two to give Steele room for his play. The couple of men making desultory pikers' bets had drawn back; the dealer had straightened his back and adjusted himself for business; the lookout on the high stool tossed away his stub of a brown cigarette; Flash Truitt had signalled to an aide to take his place, Joe Embry had at last come where he too could watch.

The ball slowed, hesitated, half stopped, came to the full stop on number seventeen.

"Repeater," muttered one of the men who had ceased playing.

While the dealer drew to him Steele's two hundred dollars and again sped the ball in its constricted course, men turned their eyes toward the man who had lost his bet, seeking to see of what stuff he was made. He merely drew slowly at his cigar, his hand quiet on his piled gold pieces, waiting for the ball to leave Pete's fingers.

"Mind if I trail your luck, Bill?" asked a quiet voice at his elbow.

He did not need to turn to see who it was. Bill Rice had come in and forced his way to Steele's side.

"Your lucky horse'll carry double," continued Rice, his hand going down into his pocket. "Fifteen dollars' worth of tickets, Pete. You ain't afraid I'll spoil your play, are you, Bill?"

"Come ahead," returned Steele quietly.

The dealer counted out Rice's stack and Steele again placed his bet. Again it was two hundred dollars, laid on number five. Rice hastily accompanied it with his own bet of seven dollars. The ball, in its characteristic indecision, came to rest on number four. The dealer drew in the two hundred and seven dollars.

"Good sign to lose at the beginnin'," grunted Rice with apparent satisfaction.

"He's lost four hundred in two shots," whispered one of the onlookers to a newcomer.

And again Steele lost, again it was two hundred dollars risked against overpowering chance. This time he had bet on thirteen and Rice had shoved out a stack representing five dollars to go into the quick fingers of the dealer. And again, two hundred lost by Steele, his last three dollars gone from Bill Rice.

"Wait a minute, Bill," commanded Steele, as Rice was drawing back with a shrug. "I'll stake you in a minute."

Eight hundred dollars gone while the ball had circled four times. And yet, had he won at any one of those hazards, then would he have broken the bank. Now, taking the same long chance, he placed the last two hundred of the first thousand dollars on the table, picking his old favourite number five to win. While the hasting ball held the result in doubt he turned his head quickly. Joe Embry had come closer and now was watching him with frankly unhidden interest, a contemptuous smile in his eyes. Steele turned back to the table and watched the ball come to rest marking number twelve.

"There's a thousand more in the bank now than there was at the start," offered the dealer tonelessly.

"Come again, friend. The roof's off for you."

"He's just gettin' started, pardner," grunted Rice.

"Look out for him."

As the ball left the quick fingers, Steele cut his stack of twenties in half, dropping five hundred on the red where the odds are not so great against a man. The dealer allowed himself a smile; it was his thought that Steele had begun to lose a little of his nerve, that he was going to play just as near safe as a man can play who dallies with roulette. But he looked up for a swift reappraisal as Steele placed the other five hundred out on the table, playing number five again.

"Should I win you can cover it?" he was asking quietly.

Embry pushed his way up to the table; Flash Truitt and he stood side by side. Embry spoke a quiet word in Truitt's ear. Truitt answered Steele's question, saying quickly:

"We can cover."

The ball was slowing down, flirting with the numbers. Steele stood the chance of losing his whole second thousand, or of winning five hundred with the one bet on the red if red came, losing the other bet and so breaking even on the play . . . and stood the long chance of winning seventeen thousand dollars if number five was chosen by the ivory pellet as its resting place.

Now he did not watch the table, but keenly studied Joe Embry's face. He had had one inspiration to-night; now he believed that another had come to him.

He had no doubt that Embry had prompted and engineered the attack at the Goblet. Now it was Embry's way to do most things from under cover just as he was running the string of gambling houses; it was further Embry's way to play safe. That bit of outlawry of the other night had entailed its double danger of a bullet in the darkness and a possible sentence in the state prison. Would Embry take chances like that just for the sake of striking at Bill Steele? Or did he need the money?

There was the question: Was Joe Embry already hard driven? While he posed at affluence had his affairs, perhaps, not prospered? Right now was he unusually eager that Steele should lose and lose heavily? Not so much because he hated the man as because he wanted the money?

But Embry's face was like a mask. His own thoughts he kept his own. Steele turned back to the table. The ball was slackening its speed. It flirted with number five, almost promising Steele thirty-five times the five hundred dollars he had placed there. Steele jerked up his head and again stared at Embry. This time he saw that Embry's lips had tightened perceptibly. Another instant and he saw a quick light leap up in the sombre eyes; he had little need to turn back to the table to know that number five had lost.

And now would it be red or black? He still had his chance to break even on the single play. And, like a final assurance that his "luck" had deserted him, black won.

THE JUDGMENT OF THE IVORY

He caught the flash of triumph in Embry's eye, the look which Embry turned upon him mockingly.

"Two thousand more in the till than when I started," droned the dealer, drawing the stacked coins to him with both hands. "Come again, friend?"

For the first time a little flush showed under Steele's tan, showed and was gone. With no answer to Pete, he turned to Truitt.

"Have you telephoned to the other dives yet?" he asked coolly, "for some more money?"

"It doesn't seem needed yet, does it?" demanded Truitt sharply.

"I'll take ten thousand dollars of chips if I can see something worth while to play for," Steele told him steadily. "I began by saying that I wasn't shooting nickels tonight. Can you show me enough in your drawer to make it worth a man's while to stake ten thousand?"

The dealer shrugged, leaving the answer to Truitt. And now it was Embry saying bluntly:

"Do it. Telephone to Summit City, Indian City and Red Cliff. I'll put up a thousand from my own pocket to see you clean this man. You can get the other cash here in a couple of hours."

"I want to see at least fifty thousand," said Steele, still addressing Truitt. "Can you scare that up as bait for my ten thousand?"

"Yes!" cried Truitt. "Damn it, yes. Give me two hours."

Steele nodded, turned and made his way through the

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en going to the door, Rice at his heels. If he were a fool to take the long chances offered a man at the wheel, well, at least Bill Steele knew that as well as another. If he chose to risk, to lose ten or twelve thousand tonight, well, he had risked and lost more before now. But he was not the man to miss the chance he thought he saw to "smash Joe Embry." Just outside Rice caught up with him.

"Mean it, Steele?" asked Rice, his voice a trifle excited. "Goin' after him that strong?"

"Yes, I am," returned Steele.

"Then," cried Rice, hanging on his heel, "I'll just stick around and keep my eye on that lay-out until you get back! The table is as square as any of them, and it's goin' to stay that way."

"With that crowd watching they'd hardly dare monkey with it," said Steele. But Bill Rice merely grunted and turned back to see whatever might be done.

At his cabin Steele spent upwards of two hours smoking and thinking. From tomorrow on he was going to do what a man could to put himself upon a new footing with Beatrice Corliss. If one day he could make her think of him a little as he felt toward her, that was his one aim in life. Just how one did this sort of thing, just how he, Bill Steele, should set about "making love" seriously, he did not know. But he saw his work cut out for him and it was to begin as soon as might be. In the meantime, tonight he had to do with Joe Embry.

So far as Steele knew Joe Embry might be a very

rich man just now. But with that sort of certainty which sometimes stands sturdily upon a foundation of hazard, he believed very strongly that Embry was over eager for money because he needed it mightily, that if at Embry's own game he could break Embry's bank, he would be in part paying off a rather long score. To do that he was ready to take his chance, the long, long chance which the wheel gives him who woos her.

His telephone ringing at last found him unshaken in his determination. It was Flash Truitt, saying eagerly:

"We're all ready if you are, Mr. Steele."

"I'll be right over," returned Steele and hung up. He took his automatic from his pocket, shoved it into his trousers band, buttoned his coat about it and made his way promptly to the gambling house.

A glance at the dealer's drawer assured him that Embry's messengers had come. But before he had cashed his check for ten thousand dollars he insisted upon estimating the strength of the bank he had set out to "buck." It had increased to forty-seven thousand dollars.

"I called for fifty thousand at least," he said quietly.

"Your own check for ten thousand goes in with the rest," the dealer answered him. "Making a total of fifty seven thousand. All right?"

"If it is the best you can do, yes. Give me chips this time; fifty chips, figuring each one at two hundred. Let her roll, pardner."

As before, Steele was the only man playing. By mon consent the other players left off, prefer

stand in a tight-packed mass watching him than to make their own smaller bets. And also, as before, Rice moved up close to his side.

"I said I'd stake you," said Steele. "How much, Bill?"

"One chip; Pete'll give me regular value chips for two hundred bones for it."

The chip passed into Rice's hands, was shoved to the dealer and honoured with other tall stacks. The ball was rolling; Steele leaned forward and placed his first bet. It was one chip, two hundred dollars, on number five. Rice accompanied it with the venture of four dollars.

"That's my pro ratty!" grinned Rice.

While the first play was in progress Joe Embry came forward through a back door and took his former place near the end of the bar, whence he could watch. Chewing at his cigar, he looked placid and cool, though there was unusual lustre to his black eyes. The dealer called for a glass of mineral water and settled down to alert attention to business. The lookout sat with his right hand lost under his coattail.

"Twenty-six," remarked the dealer when the ball stopped, touching the lucky square of the table with a finger tip, drawing in two hundred and four dollars and setting the ball spinning.

Men craned their necks to see the next play, seeking to know if Steele were playing a "system." His answer was another bet on number five, this time for four hundred dollars.

"Doubles each time," commented a long, yellow

visaged spectator. "Which ain't bad if you can stick it out."

Bill Rice doubled with him, offering eight dollars, standing to win two hundred eighty dollars to Steele's fourteen thousand.

"Nine wins," said Pete, and with leisurely arm accepted the two bets which, with the ball speeding again, he arranged in their places at his hand.

"If he doubles 'em again," muttered the jaundiced man, "he's a sport!"

And Steele doubled without hesitation, laying eight hundred dollars on number five. Rice followed his lead, serenely awaiting a winning, hazarding his sixteen dollars. And both lost, the ball indicating the double-O.

Now would Steele double again? Would even he, plunger as a few quick plays had shown him to be, hazard sixteen hundred dollars on one play? Even Rice looked quickly up into his face for the answer. But no answer was there to be read; it was given with the gesture which again sought number five and shoved to it eight blue chips, each chip, two hundred dollars. Shrugging, Rice followed him with thirty-two.

And they lost.

"Me," pondered Bill Rice, "I'm out sixty little bones like one two three. An' Bill's shot three thousand! The ol' son of a gun!"

The ball rolled and men stretched their necks in that tense excitement which is allowed onlookers. Yes; he was going to double again. . . . No, he wasn't. He was playing his original bet again, two hundred dollars on number five. And five lost, the double-O repeating.

"She's sure a great little repeater when she gets started, huh, boys? Four hundred again, Mr. Steele?"

"You guessed it, pardner," said Steele.

The four hundred he lost, number eleven winning. Coolly he played eight hundred . . . and lost. Sixteen hundred . . . and lost.

"There's another six thousand in the till now, friend," droned Pete. "And plenty room."

A man laughed; Rice scowled at him; Steele smiled and went back the second time to his original bet of two hundred. He caught a glimpse of Embry's face and that look hardened the muscles of his entire body. He emulated the dealer and called for a glass of Shasta.

The two hundred, Bill Rice's four dollars with it, went where the other bets had gone. Steele drank his water, pushed his hat back, bet four hundred. Lost and doubled; lost and doubled. Lost and was aware of the fact that after this brief time of quick play he had paid across the table an even nine thousand dollars. Since he had staked Rice to two hundred he had just eight hundred left. And since every man who watched knew as well as he did just what was left to him, every man of them asked himself:

"Will he stick to the same thing?"

If so he had but three plays left to make should the goddess of chance not alter her attitude toward him, two hundred, four hundred and a final two hundred. But those who had watched thus far knew that he was not the man to drag out a long play; that he took his chances and did not "play for nickels." And they felt

that he would do what he did. He placed two hundred dollars on number five. And lost.

"Two more bets, friend," said the dealer.

"Just one, out of this little bunch of change," returned Steele equably. And having placed his last bet of six hundred dollars, he sought his pipe. If that six hundred should be swept from number five into the dealer's pile, he was asking himself soberly: "What will I do next? Quit or buy another stack?"

But the ball had stopped and he turned a little to smile into Joe Embry's bright eyes.

"Number five wins," droned the dealer. "Twenty-one thousand, friend; five hundred sixty to your friend."

Black anger was in Joe Embry's eyes; a surge of joy in Steele's heart. Twenty-one thousand dollars he had won on the last play . . . against an investment of twelve thousand . . . he had regained his losses and made nine thousand dollars over all. . . .

"Most likely he'll quit now," came a cool, contemptuous voice, the voice of Embry, which, cold as it was, was vibrant with passion.

"Quit?" snapped Steele, swinging about on him. "Quit, Joe Embry? No, damn you, I won't quit. I'm out after you tonight and what's more I am going to get you."

The ball rolled and Steele placed his bet. He had estimated swiftly that there remained in the bank, counting his own check, approximately thirty-six thousand dollars. And so, with that in mind, he laid his chips.

"One thousand dollars, pardner," he offered casually. "On number five to repeat!"

Now Embry came a step forward and allowed his placid brows to be drawn into rough furrows; now men struggled on the outer fringe to crowd closer; now Rice's fingers shook a little as he made his companion bet of one hundred dollars, losing in the excitement his former judgment of "pro ratty." And men breathed softly or breathed not at all while the ivory ball circled and slowed and hesitated and seemed to stop and rolled on and on, filled with indecision until the last, and came to a dead stop on . . . number five!

A shout went up to go far out into the woods to vie with the rumble and roar and boom of Thunder River; in the uproar the dealer's open palm falling upon his table seemed to strike soundlessly; the dealer's lips, forming the words "Broke the bank, by God!" shaped sounds that died in the din; Joe Embry's face went white, dead white, while his eyes stared incredulously. For on that last play alone Bill Steele had won thirty-five times the amount he had played, and that meant thirty-five thousand dollars; Bill Rice had won thirty-five hundred . . . and in the bank there was no longer the money to pay out "a man's sized bet"!

Unruffled, the dealer was stacking out upon the table the forty-six thousand dollars which were Steele's when he "cashed," when Embry's voice broke in stridently:

"Hold on there, Pete! Don't pay that bet! The wheel has gone bad. . . ."

"So?" Steele wheeled upon him, his hand inside

his coat now, the fingers locked to the grip of his automatic. "So, Joe Embry? Walk easy, Joe; talk easy, and don't make a mistake. Bill, rake in what's ours and count it."

Bill Rice, outright after his fashion, drew in the money with one hand, his left, while in full sight of him who cared to see was Bill Rice's old style Colt forty-five, very still in his right hand. And out of the corner of his alert eyes Rice, too, watched Embry and Truitt and the lookout.

"Fair play!" shouted a big voice. "He's won it. Take it, Steele. We're with you."

"Thanks," Steele answered. "I'm taking it."

Embry, beside himself for one of the few occasions in his life, drew and fired. But a disinterested onlooker had seized him by the shoulders and jerked him backward, the bullet tore into the ceiling and Embry disappeared under three or four men who had thrown themselves upon him.

"Take it, friend," droned the dealer. "It's yours and I wouldn't wait too long. Hey, barkeep, gimme another shot Shasta."

Steele and Rice were accompanied to the cabin by half a dozen of Rice's friends. To a man they were exuberant that a game run in a house of Flash Truitt . . . or Joe Embry . . . should be made to pay. Doubly exuberant as Steele thanked them for their company. For as they departed every man of them carried in his pocket a little gift, and each gift was of one hundred dollars.

"Talk about luck!" cried Rice exultantly. "Didn't I tell you, Bill Steele? Didn't I tell you?"

And Steele already was wondering if there really *were* such a thing as luck and if his would stay with him until . . .

"Lucky at gamblin', though," grinned Rice, "un-lucky in love they say! Huh, Bill? You an' me don't give a damn, though; do we?"

Whereupon Steele could have found it in his heart to kick his joyous friend. He wondered . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

TWO MEN AND A GIRL

DIRECTING the varied endeavours which went forward unceasingly, Bill Steele found that while his hands were full of mining operations and town building and timber cutting, there were times when he came perilously near losing interest in all this on which he had planned so long and with such ardour. The reason was the simple reason, the old reason, the vital reason; it was a great deal pleasanter to think of a girl than of a shaft driven into the earth or of the ore that came out of it or of crude timbers outlining tourist hotel and cottage.

Between him and Beatrice there stood a wall. His own careless hands had piled it there. Now came the inevitable query: How high was this wall? Might he reach over it? How massive a thing was it? Might he push it aside?

He wanted to ask Bob Carruthers how he had won Sylvia; he wanted to be told by Ed Hurley how he had gained Rose's consent. Of course these two fellows had had no such problem as his, since they were sane men and he wasn't. At least he hadn't been until now. He wanted to demand many explanations from them . . . and kept his lips locked. It began to appear to him that he was losing his nerve!

"Good Lord," he groaned inwardly. "If this flabby degeneration in me goes on much longer I'd be

afraid to grab her hand and talk to her if she gave me the chance!" And, paraphrasing the old bard, he decided that this tender passion makes cowards of us all. . . .

"Just the same I'm going to have you, Beatrice Corliss," he said to himself over many a stubborn pipe. "All to myself . . . somehow . . . sometime. . . ."

Then a man would come to him for orders or with a report of something gone wrong or the telephone would ring and for a little he would seek to force Beatrice Corliss to the rim of his consciousness. But, the work done, she always came back to become the centre of his thoughts.

He had made money swiftly and largely, quite as a man of his calibre must make or lose money. He had prospered. His ventures were going forward smoothly, promising further golden harvests. And now, as before, Bill Steele in many a fresh, fragrant dawn and in many a serene star filled evening, admitted that money didn't count overmuch and that he was very, very far from having that which did count.

Forced to take on a temporary mining superintendent in Hurley's place, he began operations on a big scale at the cave on the river, which sprang immediately into local fame as Steele's Cache. There a vein was promptly uncovered which promised well from the beginning and from now on there was a regular hauling to the railroad. Putting this portion of his efforts into the hands of the new man and of Bill Rice, he devoted several days to planning with Carruthers for further improvements at Indian City and Bear Town,

where lots were being laid out and sold off to interested speculators. And from the beginning he sought tirelessly to come a little closer to Beatrice Corliss.

But when he tried to telephone he was told briefly by Booth Stanton that she "was away"; just where or for how long was not made clear. When he wrote she must have marked an absence of impudence, and yet no answers came to his notes.

He got into the habit of dropping in to chat with Carruthers' wife and watch the Twins when he could. Sylvia, alert and quick as a flash, was not long in coming to a certain understanding of Bill Steele's altered manner. Times were when he'd sit still for ten minutes with a Twin clinging to a big forefinger; when he'd forget to be the old Bill Steele whom she knew. And the look in his eyes which Sylvia surprised there repeatedly was a wide open book in her own mother tongue to that keen witted young matron.

"He ~~is~~ in love, Bob," she told her husband.

"Sure," laughed Carruthers. "Didn't I tell you when he showed up in San Francisco that he had the case of his life on some Italian widow woman?"

"Pooh!" scoffed Sylvia, frankly revealing her utter feminine contempt of the species masculine. "It's Beatrice Corliss!"

"Can't be," said Carruthers, the masculine. "Why, Bill himself told me they're deadly foes or something like that. They've been fighting each other ever since he came up here."

"Which settles it positively," cried Sylvia in full triumph. "Isn't it splendid!"

"Is it?" Carruthers supposed it was, but promptly forgot the whole matter under discussion as he went to hang over the Twins' double bed. "Sure they look like me, Sylvia?" he wanted to know.

Steele, fancying that his secret was safe in his own breast, had gone from Indian City, where the Carruthers were, to Summit City to look in on Hurley and Turk. He found them both doing well and left, saying bluntly to both of them as he went out:

"Take a good vacation while you're at it; your pay goes on just the same."

He had not stopped with the Hurleys over twenty minutes. But Rose had said to her husband before Steele had ridden out of sight:

"I wonder who the girl is, Ed?"

Again was Steele ready to forget Joe Embry in the demands made against him by the present. But such oblivion must be brief, so long as he held his unchanged opinion of the man and so long as events in a rough and rapidly developing community hinted at lawlessness. So it was that Joe Embry came back prominently into his thought.

Since that night in the gambling house at Boom Town the paths of the two men had not crossed; again Embry seemed to have passed out of the new town's affairs. But when, just seven days after the roulette game of which men still talked, two messages came close together over Steele's telephone, he explained two unfortunate episodes by the one word, "Embry!"

It was after a day's work at the hour when dusk had thickened into dark and the lights were ablaze in the sky above and the camps below. Steele, taking up his instrument in his cabin-office, with a careless "Hello," was greeted by Carruthers' voice saying sharply:

"Don't know what to make of it, Billy . . . fires all over town . . . we've saved the hotel, I think. Don't know about the store yet. Half a dozen cottages gone. Better come over, hadn't you?"

And that was about all from Carruthers. Except, of course, that he heartily cursed "somebody" for the job; houses didn't set themselves on fire.

Steele was drawing on his coat preparatory to riding immediately to Indian City when the second disquieting message came over the telephone line. This time from the railroad town of Selby Flat; the man speaking excitedly was a stranger to him.

"Hansen my name is," came the hurried explanation. "Work down to the railroad yards, you know. Howard Wendall told me to tell you . . ."

"Well?" demanded Steele sharply. "What now?"

He half guessed what the reply would be; Howard Wendall was his paymaster-general, the man under himself who saw to the distribution of the pay rolls for the men at the Goblet, Indian City, Bear Town and the lumber mills.

"He's right bad hurt," said the man Hansen. "All beat up, you know. Found him layin' senseless on the street; he'd tried to get help an' went out . . ."

But at last Steele had the story. Wendall had gone as usual into Selby Flat for the moneys required to

pay off the men, had gotten the amount in gold and bank notes and, planning on riding early in the morning, had carried it with him to his room. He had been robbed by men whose faces he had not seen, men who had broken into his room and had beaten him into insensibility. . . . Hansen hadn't all of the details yet; Wendall was still too weak to talk much. . . . He had been on his way to get help when he had fainted and Hansen stumbled over him. . . . Hansen didn't know how much money . . .

The money was the least of it just then to Bill Steele; for already had the word "Embry" shaped large in his brain. He gave orders for Wendall to be taken care of, then rang up his foreman in Bear Town, telling him curtly to lose not a second in posting men to see that the fires of Indian City were not duplicated. Then he jerked off his coat, sat down and thought.

Just how big the pay roll was he himself did not know. Some of the men accepted a monthly wage; others were paid up each Saturday night. Wendall might have had only a couple of thousand dollars with him or he might have had five thousand.

"Joe Embry's work as sure as water runs down hill," he grunted angrily. "Arranged to pull off both jobs and, as usual, hired the jobs done. And, by the Lord, it looks as if he were playing safe, too, with Jim Banks muzzled . . . and Embry with an alibi! Damn that kind of a man!"

Embry was heard from, Embry would be heard from again. Of that, at least, he was sure.

"There's just one thing," he cried out suddenly,

flinging out of his chair. "If the law has gone rotten in Jim Banks' hands and can't run Joe Embry out, it's up to me!"

He swept up his hat and went out, striding swiftly toward Boom Town. He'd learn if Embry were in town or when he had been here last, he'd get Flash Truitt and make him talk. And when he found Embry, Embry was going to walk out of the country.

With the one long, straggling street of Boom Town under foot, with the saloon in front of him, he stopped dead in his tracks, stopped and stared. For there over the unsightly building was a great new sign which he knew had not been there three hours ago, and so that the big letters might draw every chance eye a lantern swung at each end of the inscription. The letters themselves were

THE QUEEN'S SALOON

"Now what in thunder does that mean!" he wondered. And then the red colour of rage ran up into his cheeks and he came on, striding swiftly, his two big fists bunching involuntarily. For he knew as well as if Joe Embry himself had told him; knew that the whole country was to see and laugh and drag Beatrice Corliss' name after them into the bar room; knew that Embry would tell her of it, crying out, "Some more of the impudence of that man Steele!"

Over the front door was a low shed roof like an awning. He caught it with both hands and swung up. Men at the door saw and came out to watch; some one

laughed; others came out, Flash Truitt with them. And they saw Bill Steele fling a burning lantern across the street, yank the other down and lay his hands on the sign.

"Hey, there!" shouted Truitt angrily. "Leave that sign alone."

Steele made no answer, but jerked the thing loose, ripping a plank away with it, and lifting it high over his head brought it smashing down on the ridge of the house so that it cracked and split from end to end. The halves he split again, making kindling wood of them while Truitt cursed and threatened from below. Then he came down.

"Have you anything to say?" he demanded hotly, standing close to the gambler, his eyes flashing, his voice vibrant. "You damned contemptible cur, have you anything to say?"

And Flash Truitt, seeing the look in the eyes glaring into his own, sensing the wrath in Steele's soul, turned quickly and went back into his saloon.

The next morning early, to be before any chance rumours of what had befallen in Boom Town, Joe Embry appeared at Beatrice's home. Cool, self-sufficient, well groomed, still there was a light in his eyes almost as of an inner fever. Told that Beatrice was not up yet, he asked that his name be carried to her and that she see him as soon as possible.

Beatrice, coming into the drawing room, found him pacing back and forth; as he turned sharply she saw the tense look in the man's face.

"I have been expecting you," she said lightly, telling herself that perhaps Joe Embry, too, being a mortal like herself, had trying days. "I have had a number of guests with me for three days now and have wanted you to meet some of them. There's a Mrs. Denham, a young widow," and she smiled, "in particular. . . ."

He waved the words aside, looking at her gravely.

"Steele has come out into the open a bit," he told her slowly, his eyes steady on hers. "With his string of gambling houses, you know. I hear that he has placed insulting signs over every one of them. The place in Boom Town is placarded for the world to read as the Queen's Saloon; the one in Summit City, though closed now, as Queen Trixie's Road House. I . . . Beatrice . . ."

Beatrice gasped.

"What!" she cried. "What!"

"Yes," said Embry. "He has done everything else he could think of and now . . . this! Miss Corliss, give me the right to deal with him. You have no father, no brother to teach that man a lesson; let mine be the right. I love you, you know how I love you. We have been the best of friends, you and I; can't we be something more than friends? I have spoken before; I have waited, giving you time to think. Hasn't the time come now? Can't you say what I want you to say, Beatrice?"

He had put out one of his strong, beautiful hands to hers while she stood listening to words which no longer were slow. She had felt the man's force; she had acknowledged, in her anger with Bill Steele, that Embry

and she stood together against a common enemy. She was asking herself if she could say what Joe Embry wanted her to say?

And then his hand, the most beautiful man's hand she had ever seen, touched hers . . . and through her whole, being ran that swift, uncontrollable shudder that was almost . . . no, not *almost*, now that it touched her, but *positively* loathing. . . .

Never had he touched her before as he was touching her now; never could she let him so touch her again.

"No!" she cried sharply, drawing back, staring at him with frightened eyes. For she was afraid, of what she did not definitely know. "No. I thank you, Mr. Embry; I appreciate what your offer means; I am sorry. But I can only say now what I should have said long ago; no."

And then, her breast tumultuous with a conflict of emotions into which entered a burning, passionate anger at Bill Steele, she did what she had never done before in her life: she whirled and ran from a mere man like a flustered school girl.

"Bill Steele," she cried out when in her own room, "I hate you, hate you, hate you! And Joe Embry . . . if you ever dare touch me again . . ."

She broke off with a shiver.

CHAPTER XXVII

MASKS

BEATRICE CORLISS had mentioned to Embry a certain Mrs. Denham because the widow had an undoubted charm for men-folk, because Mrs. Denham had evinced interest in Mr. Embry, "of whom she had heard delightful things," and finally because Beatrice would have been glad to have any woman divert Embry's growing attentions from herself. And now Mrs. Denham, petite, dark and clever, became an active aide to events going forward.

She was not a friend of Beatrice . . . just a guest. Having decided to be among the score or so of fortunates accepting the Corliss hospitality for a fortnight, she had, in her usual competent manner, accomplished her desire. Knowing the right people, it was simplicity itself to such an one as the petite, dark and clever Mrs. Denham. A letter to Beatrice from an Eastern acquaintance, the competent campaigning of Mrs. Denham and here she was among the brightest and most enthusiastic of the pleasure seekers at Thunder River ranch.

"I am fairly consuming with an abiding inner joy!" she exclaimed to her hostess. "I feel like a child again; I want to see the wheels go round. I am simply mad to meet the fascinating Mr. Embry; and I shall never rest in peace until I have met that horrid Mr.

Steele, too, and with my own eyes peeped in on the wickedness of his Boom Town."

And here one day she appeared in Boom Town, escorted by a dangling young man whom she had annexed to serve her purpose for the day. She manifested a very pretty interest in everything and anything, from the straggling shacks to the new mining shaft. She went here and there chattering and exclaiming, scattering adjectives in her train like a continuous volley of gay coloured, pigmy fireworks. Having after an hour's wanderings glimpsed Steele she promptly descended upon him, dragging her dangling young man after her.

"Isn't he splended!" she cried enthusiastically, her eyes brightening to such details as his big bulk, rough garb, great boots mud-bespattered. Her young man grunted out of that corner of his mouth not occupied with the cigarette which droopily emulated himself.

"I know you'll think I'm simply disgraceful, Mr. Steele," was her direct way of greeting his mild astonishment. He had removed his hat and accepted her little gloved hand wonderingly, having no alternative. "As no doubt I am. But I just had to tell you how wonderful your work here is; how I have never seen anything that thrilled me so. And out here, in the bigness of the eternal forests, one can for a little forget the odious conventions, can she not? I am Mrs. Denham, one of Beatrice Corliss' friends, you know. She has told me all about you."

And she shook her head at him merrily.

While Steele was still staring down into her bright

upturned face wondering what the deuce had brought her, she summoned her escort nearer with a nod and introduced him. Ensued a quarter of an hour of lively chatter, young Mr. Foxhall fidgeting, Steele inwardly contrasting the real thing in womankind with this artificial product, Mrs. Denham releasing further fireworks of superlatives. It was "*How lovely!*" here and "*So interesting!*" there, with countless *grands* and *magnificents* and *really-too-wonderfuls* like seasonings scattered copiously from the pepper-box of her mind.

But never lacking in discernment was Mrs. Denham. She read in Steele's eyes that he was about to excuse himself, claiming the necessity of his presence elsewhere, and forestalled him by saying in her lively manner:

"Really, Mr. Foxhall, we must be going. If you will bring the horses?"

Mr. Foxhall departed gladly upon his errand and Mrs. Denham, turning the battery of her smile upon Steele, said pleasantly:

"Oh, I've heard all about you, Mr. Steele. You can guess who has been talking to me, can't you? Oh, you've been perfectly horrible to poor dear Beatrice, but . . ."

Had one only Mrs. Denham's words by which to judge her he well might underestimate her. Not so, had he eyes to see such a look as now was directed upon Steele. Only a very clever woman can in one flash of her eyes say in wordless eloquence, "But doesn't a woman like sometimes for a man to be horrid to her? Haven't you succeeded in interesting her already as no other man

could do?" And surely some such thing had she managed to convey to Steele.

"Dear me," she ran on, "I have clattered away like I don't know what sort of a creature. So glad to have met you, Mr. Steele. I don't suppose that you'll be coming to the ball tomorrow night, will you? At the Corliss home, you know. Isn't Beatrice a dear to make it a mask affair, and just because I have told her how I adore a *Bal Masque*! Shall I save you a dance, Mr. Steele? Good-bye, for I am going now. Ted has the horses ready."

A puzzled and at last interested Bill Steele stared after her waving departure, still wondering. *Had* Beatrice actually told this flighty little creature all about him? It was difficult to think of Beatrice speaking intimately with this sort of a woman, and yet what did he know of her friends? Then why in the name of all that was baffling had Mrs. Denham sought him out to tell him of the ball and suggest that he come? Had she meant to give the impression which she did give, the absolutely absurd impression that Beatrice was cognizant of her errand and was willing that he come? But any explanation defied him; he had to choose between the two unanswerable problems: Had Mrs. Denham, who had never so much as seen him until now, wanted him to attend the masked ball, or had she acted as Beatrice's emissary?

Had he carried the matter to Sylvia Carruthers or to Rose Hurley either of them might have suggested something. But Bill Steele merely shoved considerations aside and determined upon the instant that

whether Beatrice was willing to see him or not he would go. Otherwise he would not have been Bill Steele.

Tonight Beatrice Corliss' whole being was pervaded by a pleasurable excitement. When had there been in any music the strong pulse which beat in her orchestra's strains tonight, when had life surged through her so eagerly, so expectantly? After the fourth dance she slipped away from the laughing, jesting couples, gathered up her fluffy skirts and ran breathless to her room. Her maid looked at her curiously.

"Quick!" commanded the girl. "Change me, Bella! Hurry, hurry!"

She had jerked off the tiny black mask in which until dancing began she had taken scant interest, her eyes shining, her cheeks warmly flushed. While Bella sought further and more definite instructions, Beatrice kicked off her slippers and began slipping out of her gown.

"Can't you understand?" she asked of the mystified serving-girl. "You see they all knew who I was; now I am going to change to another costume and . . ."

But what else she planned was not for the maid's ears.

"What gown, Miss Corliss?"

Since no fingers or feet were swift enough for her save her own Beatrice ran to a big closet, threw back the lid of an old trunk, whisked out the tray and in a moment was back before Della, carrying the costume she meant to wear. And when, with Della's aid, she had dressed again here was a new mystery to slip

back into the crowd of dancers. A pair of very bright eyes just guessed through very tiny slits of her mask, a slender body in ornamental buckskin blouse and short skirt, hands encased in gauntlets, feet and calves in high heeled buckskin boots, a girl of the big out-doors of the mountains.

"Now, they won't know me for a little while," she told the very attractive and alluring reflection in her pier glass. "And before they guess right I'll *know!*"

Della had caught her enthusiasm.

"If there was just somebody to wear the gown and things you just took off," she suggested.

Beatrice at the door, whirled and came back, laughing softly.

"Hurry, Della!" she commanded, "Just play the part for five minutes and I'll give you the whole outfit!"

And, to the last hastily adjusted flounce of lace, it was the mistress who dressed the maid, much to Della's unspeakable confusion and to Beatrice's delighted satisfaction.

"A scarf over your head, Della . . . your hair is just a little too dark . . . about your face, too, a bit . . . like that. . . . You mustn't talk, you know — that's perfectly . . . Gloves, Della. You must have gloves . . ."

At last it was done and despite her protestation and growing embarrassment, Della the maid, went slowly down the long hall way, her colour very high, her heart beating like mad. And Beatrice, watching and then following, as unostentatiously as possible, carried a heart scarcely less fluttering.

"And now we'll see what you'll do, Mr. Smarty Bill Steele!" she told herself expectantly when at last Della had entered the ball room and she herself had again mingled with the couples forming for the new dance. "As if you could masquerade any more successfully at a dance like this than a big old elephant at a butterfly party!"

Standing by the open windows, framed against the black of the outer night, was a big man in conventional evening dress with a home made mask completely hiding his face and allowing merely the piercing look of his watchful eyes through small holes. While Beatrice watched him he was watching Della. It was very obvious that he was watching Della, that he had eyes for no one else. A gauntleted hand went swiftly to Beatrice's lips to hide the laughter that curved them.

"Oh, I know you, Mr. Impudent Bill Steele!" she whispered to herself. "I'd know you anywhere. And you had the assurance to come like this into my house!"

Properly she should be angry. But she knew that she wasn't. She was just delighted, delighted that he had come, that she had recognized him at the instant that he arrived, that now she could watch him dance with Della. And presently, when he discovered who Della was, why then Beatrice would still be watching and would no longer hold back her laughter. And then, if he did not go, she would have him thrust out doors . . .

A knot of half a dozen men had formed swiftly about the embarrassed Della. Beatrice saw how her hands were everywhere at once, trying to hide her hair, her

cheek, her hands themselves. Men were asking her to dance, were begging her. . . .

Through the knot of men came Bill Steele suddenly, saying bluntly, "Beg pardon," as he shoved them aside. Then Bill Steele's arm was about Della, he had drawn her toward him, swinging her nearly off of her paralysed feet to the strain of the music, and the two swung out among the whirling couples.

Near Beatrice, drawn back against the wall, was another man whom she thought that she recognized; it was Joe Embry and Embry's eyes had gone swiftly and frowningly she thought after Steele and Della. Beatrice could have clapped her hands. If only Della could play the part!

"Hello, Miriam, my dear," said a whispered voice in her ear. "As if any one wouldn't know you!"

It was the little widow, Mrs. Denham, tricked out girlishly but not to be mistaken. Beatrice let her pass without telling her that she was not Miriam Dodge and would have paid no more attention to her had not Mrs. Denham gone straight to Embry. She had startled him by coming up behind him. Without withdrawing his look from Steele and Della he returned her greeting. Beatrice promptly lost interest in these two of her guests, hoping in passing that they might come to be interested in each other, and then watched Steele.

A partnerless man bore down upon her then and rather than risk discovery through arguing the point with him she accepted his arm and danced. But even

so she had no difficulty in keeping Steele's tall form in view.

As the music ceased the gay, chatting couples parted or passed into the refreshment room or out into the cool dusk to stroll up and down by the windows. Beatrice, excusing herself hastily, slipped through the crowd and came close behind Steele and Della, intent upon the shamelessness of eavesdropping. She saw that Steele was bearing the confused Della onward toward the door, guessed that he was going to insist upon a word outside, the two alone. They came to the door . . . and suddenly Steele stopped.

"A thousand thanks for the dance, Unknown Lady," he said quietly.

Then he turned, seeming to have forgotten his recent partner and Della fled. His eyes went this way and that, back and forth eagerly. Then they came to rest upon the buckskin clad mountain girl just a few paces away. With big, quick strides, and before she could stir, he had come to her side.

"You fooled me for a minute, you little rascal," he laughed at her. "And now, to pay for it, come with me for a moment or two out into the court. I want to talk to you."

"Della spoiled it all by talking!" Beatrice was crying within her heart. And to him, coolly spoken: "Are you sure that you know to whom you are talking now?"

"To the Queen," he said gently, and she marked in his voice a tone which never before had she heard there,

a note which despite her set the old, odd thrill in her pulses. "The Queen of the World, so far as I am concerned! Will you come . . . please?"

For an instant she wanted to do as Della had done and flee without further ado. In that instant she turned her eyes from him, seeking an open avenue, and saw across the room that Mrs. Denham and Joe Embry were still together, that Mrs. Denham's hand was eager on Embry's arm, that both were looking toward her and Bill Steele.

"I'll be as humble as a dog," pleaded Steele, and she saw now that his eyes, too, seemed unusually grave. "Won't you come? Just for a minute and let me tell you . . ."

"No," she said icily then. "And let me tell you something which I allude to only because I don't fancy a scene here: If you remain in my house another five minutes I'll be forced to call the servants and have you thrown out. Do you understand, Mr. Steele?"

From the light in his eyes now she could imagine the flush in his cheeks.

"And do you understand, Miss Corliss," and she guessed that under his improvised mask the muscles had hardened at the base of his jaw, "that there'd be quite a little scene if your lackeys started anything before I've had a chance to talk with you? I have been a thousand years trying to see you and now . . ."

He had slipped his arm suddenly through hers, drawing her toward him. She sought to pull back and could not. The cry forming on her lips she stilled. She ceased to throw her small strength into a futile

scale against his. A man and woman passing looked at them and laughed and passed on, supposing that this was but a bit of play on the part of two of the merry making throng. In another instant Beatrice and Steele were outside.

For a dozen steps she went quietly at his side; she was thinking, and the thought left her wondering, how she would have shuddered if it had been Joe Embry who had drawn her thus. . . . Then suddenly she wrenched away and stood erect, her eyes cool and meant to be contemptuous as they met his.

"I hope that you enjoyed your dance with my maid," she said.

"She fooled me a minute," he answered gravely. "Then I guessed what you had done. I knew almost from the first that it wasn't you I held in my arms; I could tell if I were blind. Then I noticed her throat. Nobody in the world has a throat like yours or eyes like yours or your carriage or your . . . your perfection."

"Is this Mr. Steele?" mocked Beatrice. "Since when has he known how to be less than boorishly impudent? Where did he learn to say things like these you are saying?"

"I have been something of a fool," he returned. "Admittedly. I have teased you a good deal, Miss Corliss, and I don't wonder that you have made up your mind to detest me. But you've got to give me the chance to square myself. I . . . my God, how I love you! Can't you tell? Don't you know?"

For a little they were very silent standing in the

gloom among the shrubbery. From here and there in the darkness, from the pavilion set at the edge of the little fall of cliff, came laughter and gay voices. From behind them, through open doors and windows, floated cries in tune with the evening, telling of banter and much mirth over the matter of disguises at which men made guesses. But Beatrice and Bill Steele, their dimly outlined forms vague in the night, were very still. She had noted, and the discovery had set her heart to leaping, that his voice had grown suddenly gruff and that it shook to the words, little, time-worn words, which he had said.

But Beatrice's voice when she answered was as steady as even she could have wished it.

"Is this meant as further insult, Mr. Steele?" she demanded coldly.

"You know better than that," he cried with sudden passion. "Never is there insult in a decent man's offering his love to a woman, no matter who or what she is. I loved you that first day, and wouldn't let myself know. I loved you that day when you came to me in the woods, and would not let you know. Now, I don't care if the whole world knows. I love you, Beatrice Corliss, as I did not know a man could love a woman. Oh, I am clumsy as a fool at telling you, and you may laugh all you please about the manner of it. But of my love itself you must not laugh . . . for it is the one thing about me that is as good and fine as even you are!"

In a moment he was going to sweep her up into his arms, to crush her tight to him . . . she knew it, sensed

it, grew frightened at it. That was what was in his heart, in his eyes, ringing in his voice. And suddenly she knew too . . . that she would be glad . . .

She drew back from him slowly, her hands rising before her, tight clasped at her breast.

"Long ago you understood how to make me hate you," she told him quickly. "Now do you wish me to despise you, too?"

"You won't. No true woman despises a man just because he loves her."

"Have things gone so badly lately," said Beatrice, aiming to hurt, to extract payment for all that he had made her experience, "that you seek to marry money, Mr. Steele?"

"Miss Corliss," he cried out, "you shouldn't say that . . . you can't mean a thing like that. . . ."

And then suddenly, all without warning here was the same joyous Bill Steele she knew, his laughter booming out most disconcertingly at her. "You're just trying to make me mad, are you, Trixie girl! Look out if you do! Do you know," and he took a quick step toward her, "one of these fine days I think I'll just pick you up and run away with you and make you love me!"

And now, that she did not expect it, his arms were thrown about her, she was drawn close to him, he had lifted her face with a big hand under her chin and had kissed her.

"Brute!" she cried pantingly. "Brute!"

He let her go, his arms relaxing slowly, dropping to his sides.

"Forgive me," he said gently. "I couldn't help it, Beatrice. I . . . I'd do it again if you looked like that at me."

Her lips were quivering, her whole body trembled. Speechless she stood looking at him with wide eyes. Then, not trusting her voice, she turned back toward the house.

She was glad when she saw Joe Embry standing in the doorway.

"Mr. Embry," she called quickly. "Will you come here please?"

Steele, standing where he was, his pulses hammering, watched her and Joe Embry pass down the long veranda together.

CHAPTER XXVIII

“WHERE IS BEATRICE?”

UNDER the circumstances there could have been nothing more natural than Beatrice's turning to Embry, knowing that Steele's eyes were upon her. And yet, wishing to anger him, she could little understand how her act was to bring fulfilment to her desire far beyond her expectation. The very word, angry, became pale and insufficient; in thorough going Anglo-Saxon way and phrase, she had made him mad.

Mad, with the yearning to seize her away from Embry, to hold her back from the contamination of the man's very presence, once and for all to wipe the man he hated from her path. That Embry had been the cause of Hurley's and Turk's injuries, that he had fired Indian City through his agents, that he had in the same manner brutally beaten Wendall and robbed him in Selby Flat, of all this Bill Steele was very sure. And yet for a little he held himself in check and watched Embry and Beatrice pass down through the checker-board of light and shadow on the long veranda until they disappeared at the far corner of the house.

For he knew, even with the rush of hot blood along his arteries, that that man who hopes to handle a difficult situation must first have himself in hand. What things might he cry out now to regret afterward if he followed where his heart went?

"The night is young," he told himself, striving for utter calm. "Unless Embry urges her to seek to have me thrown out bodily I'd better go slow for a little."

In order to "go slow" he withdrew through the shrubbery, found a bench set apart in the shadows, sat down and filled his pipe. With the first puff of smoke his brows relaxed a bit; soon he was smiling grimly.

"She doesn't care for him," he assured himself. "Being what she is, with him what he is, she couldn't. She just couldn't."

But could she care for such as Bill Steele? There was the rub and his smile faded as completely and left as little trace behind it as the smoke rising from the glowing bowl of his pipe.

What next? Should he again enter the ball room, seeking her out? Unless he meant to go with no further word, that was what he must do; for, obviously, Beatrice would not come out to him. That matter then was settled with no great consideration; come what might of it, he'd go back and . . .

"Get my face slapped, most likely!" he grunted. "Serve me good and right."

For he was thinking of his lips upon the lips of Beatrice Corliss, of Beatrice Corliss in his arms . . .

Fifteen minutes later Steele knocked out his pipe and went to the veranda, standing at the side of the door looking in on the dancers. With eyes only for the trim little figure of the buckskin clad mountain girl he sought her everywhere, found her nowhere. Nor Embry. The two were loitering an unconscionably long time outside.

As other minutes passed, five, ten, fifteen, and neither Beatrice nor Embry came back to the call of the music's invitation, he shifted uneasily and impatiently where he stood, turning with eager expectation at every step on the veranda behind him, at every laughing voice out in the open court. Twenty minutes . . . and he swung about with a little grunt and went to look for them.

But, apart from the house, it was very dark upon the mountainside. They might be out in the little pavilion, anywhere in the gardens, even in the higher pavilion at the rear and above the house. From one spot to another he went, seeking them. Many a whispering couple wondered at the big silent man who bore down upon a quiet tête-à-tête, stooped toward them, went on. And nowhere did he find Beatrice or Joe Embry.

He had been so very sure that she could not care for this man; then why was she alone with him so long? In spite of him he began to picture a tender intimacy between them, even visualized Beatrice in Embry's arms. At the thought, which he sought to banish abruptly, he hurried on, looking for them.

By now they must have returned to the house. He turned back, passed through the rooms where the dance was in full swing, visited the refreshment room, scanned the library where a number of maskers sat and chatted and smoked. But nowhere did he see either Beatrice or Embry.

The remainder of that night was as near hell for Bill Steele as any night he could remember. He would not go without again seeing Beatrice; of that he was stubbornly determined. And yet, since there are times

when man's will is shoved aside and set at naught by passing events, he was not to see her.

Until after midnight the dance went gaily on. Staring moodily at the dancers, guessing the identities of none of them save that of a negligible and insignificant little widow who bored him, he shaped and discarded a score of explanations of Beatrice's absence. He would wait until the end, when the unmasking came . . .

And then, at last, it was the negligible and insignificant little widow who bored him who announced that there was to be no unmasking! Just to make this dance different from others, she cried out gaily in the last lull before the good night valse; just so that tomorrow there might be those who wondered if they had blundered . . .

Many acclaimed the suggestion with clapping hands; Steele's greeting to it was a disgusted "Damn!" Was this some of Beatrice's work? Had she told the exasperating Mrs. Denham what to say? Had she again changed her costume, coming back long ago, dancing with the rest, laughing behind a new mask at Steele's idiocy? And Embry, had she taken him in with her on her stroke of retaliation, had he, too, simply changed and come back to the others?

For an instant he wondered; then he knew. Beatrice could not hide herself from him like this. He would know her in any garb. And he'd know Joe Embry, too.

The dance was over. Couples strolled, loitered, said lingering or sleepy good nights and disappeared, going to their rooms. And Steele knew, as well as he knew

anything in the world, that Beatrice had not returned.

Maybe she had slipped in at the rear and gone quietly to her own room? Yes, maybe. But he did not believe it. It was not like Beatrice; she was not the one to run away like that. He began to be uneasy, to fear for her. She had been last with Embry, and Embry of all men in the world he distrusted the most. And where was Embry?

He, too, might have gone home. But where was the sense of it all?

The servants were putting out the lights. Bradford came and went in his quiet way, seeing that doors were closed and locked. The big house was slowly surrendering to the utter blackness of the night. Only here and there were thin lines of light about the edges of drawn window shades where tired guests were hastening to bed. Steele turned and went slowly for his horse. Obviously there was no need, no reason in his lingering here longer.

His heart was troubled with vague dread for Beatrice. As he rode toward his cabin at the Goblet he turned over and over in his thoughts the many explanations which had offered themselves. In turn each one was abandoned as unconvincing and insufficient. And, with every yard flung behind him, his fear for Beatrice grew. He told himself that he was suddenly grown fanciful, that in sober truth his paraphrase of the other day had been truer than he knew, that his love was making a coward of him. But for all that his anxiety was not dispelled.

Suddenly when some two or three miles from the

ranch house he jerked in his horse with a sharp exclamation, sitting rigid in his saddle. After the brief indecision and mental uncertainty which is the first growth of dread such as was his there comes a quickening of the brain, a lightninglike surety of suspicion. Thoughts which dovetailed now and led in perfected order to an inevitable conclusion ticked through his mind. He had come tonight because Mrs. Denham had suggested it to him; she had gone out of her way to speak of the ball; she had pretended at an intimacy with Beatrice which he could not believe in; tonight he had seen her talking with Embury; and finally, *it had been Mrs. Denham who in her gayest manner had suggested that there be no unmasking!*

Steele swung his horse about with a savage jerk, crying out aloud wrathfully, touched his spurs to the animal's flanks and with reckless disregard of the uneven trail underfoot blotted out by the darkness raced back toward the ranch house. Mrs. Denham knew where Beatrice was; Mrs. Denham had wanted her disappearance to pass unnoticed; and Mrs. Denham was going to tell him everything she knew.

He had left the ranch house being drawn into the embrace of the darkness; he returned to it to find that lights blazed everywhere. Riding at a gallop into the courtyard where he was afoot before his horse had fairly come to a standstill, he was greeted by an obvious atmosphere of alarm. He saw through an open door some two or three women, hastily covered with kimonos drawn loosely about them, all talking excitedly. Men's voices rose above the sharp exclamations of the women,

men, also hurriedly dressed and plainly concerned, were to be seen on the verandas, in the yards and at the doors.

As Steele appeared among them unexpectedly out of the outer darkness he was greeted by a sharp, wondering cry here, a muttered exclamation there; the women near the door drew back from him, staring curiously.

"Where is Mrs. Denham?" he demanded loudly. He had come straight on and into the room where fully a dozen of Beatrice's guests were grouped and talking rapidly. Then he discovered her across the room, her hair down but not in the unbecoming confusion he had noted on every hand, her petite figure clothed in a vivid green kimono. He came on to her swiftly, with eyes for no one else.

"I want to talk with you," he told her, an ominous sternness in voice and eyes alike. "Alone. Come with me into the library."

Mrs. Denham shot him a sharp, half frightened look, seemed to hesitate, then as his eyes rested steadily upon her followed him. When the two were alone in the library and Steele had shut the door upon the many interested glances which had followed them, he stood frowning down at her angrily.

"Where is Beatrice?" he demanded.

"Oh, dear!" cried Mrs. Denham. "That's what we are all wondering. We . . ."

"Where is Joe Embry?" he cut in sharply.

"He has gone to look for her. He left word . . ."

"Tell me as fast as you can get it out just what has happened."

"Mr. Embry was with poor dear Beatrice in the garden," said Mrs. Denham hastily. "We were all masked . . . But you know that part, don't you? We didn't miss them. After we'd got to bed Mr. Embry got the ropes off and the gag out of his mouth and gave the alarm. He had been lying out there all that time. Isn't it terrible, Mr. Steele? And Beatrice . . ."

She broke off with a shudder. Steele's frowning eyes gave no sign that he had been impressed by it.

"Beatrice," continued Mrs. Denham quickly, "was seized by four or five men; Mr. Embry didn't know how many. They carried her off and . . ."

"Mrs. Denham," said Steele with bright hard anger in his eyes. "Don't lie to me! I want to know what this whole crazy plan means, understand? And you are going to tell me!"

Mrs. Denham drew back from him, a little flurry of fear in her eyes.

"I don't know what you mean . . ."

"You do know. It's a put up job between you and Joe Embry. You have got her somewhere, why I don't know. But I am going to know just as fast as you can tell me. Where is Beatrice?"

She shrugged.

"If you know so very much . . ."

He came swiftly to her, towering above her.

"Tell me!" he commanded. Again she shrugged.

"I know only what Mr. Embry told me, That he was overpowered and bound, Beatrice dragged away. That," she added coolly, "he very much suspected it

was your work. That you had done everything else to hurt her."

For the first time in his life Steele knew the burning desire to strike a woman. She was lying to him and he knew it. And yet bluster and threat would get him nowhere with her. He strode across the room, paused and regarded her long and searchingly.

"You and Embry are very close friends?" he asked, forcing himself at last to speak quietly. "Is that it, or . . ."

"Or what, Mr. Steele?"

"Or," he blurted out, "has he paid you for your part?"

"Haven't you insulted me enough?"

"No," came his crisp rejoinder. "I don't think I have. I think that I know the sort you are, Mrs. Denham. If that be an insult here is an added one: Joe Embry paid you and for the information you can give me I will pay you twice as much!"

He saw that his second "insult" had been coolly received, that Mrs. Denham's bright eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Eagerly he awaited her answer.

"You are a strange sort of man, Mr. Steele," was what she said.

He made no reply, fixing her with a keen regard. Presently she laughed.

"You asked if Mr. Emery and I were very dear friends? I think that I have never known a man to detest more heartily. You say that you know what sort I am? Let us see. I am a widow with no thought of marrying again. I like the pretty things of life.

Things one has to pay for. Is that what you thought?"

"Go on," he said curtly. "How much did Embry give you?"

Now she was studying him shrewdly.

"If I said ten thousand dollars?"

"I'd make it another twenty thousand!"

"If I said . . . let me see. Twenty-five thousand?"

"I'd make it fifty thousand! If you can show me the way to find her."

A bright flush was in her cheeks; she came to him and laid a hand which was suddenly unsteady on his arm.

"Write me a check for fifty thousand dollars," she whispered. "Then have a car ready to take me away immediately. Before Embry knows. And I will tell you where he has taken her. And I'll be glad, glad that you have beat Joe Embry! He has planned to compromise her so that she will have to marry him . . . oh, he is fool enough to think that she'd do it! But she wouldn't. We know that, don't we, Mr. Steele?"

"Do we?" he asked coldly.

"We do! And, to give you full value for your check, my big foolish friend, let me whisper something into your ear: Beatrice is head over heels in love with you right now! Now, order a car for me and I'll get dressed and meet you at the back door. There'll be no trumpets blaring when I take my departure."

Gathering up her kimono about her she ran out of the room, disappearing through a door opposite the one through which they had entered.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE YOUNG QUEEN SEES THE TRUTH

FOR Beatrice Corliss a night of horror, for Joe Embry the supreme endeavour and final treachery. The treachery of a man builded upon the treachery of a woman of the Mrs. Denham ilk, a structure which might stand or might totter and fall, as fate willed it.

Beatrice had known what it was to feel rude hands upon her, to have a terrified outcry stifled in her throat, to see vague threatening shapes struggling about her in the darkness where she had gone with Embry, to watch Embry go down under those struggling forms, to wonder breathlessly if he had been killed, then to feel herself lifted bodily in a pair of strong arms and carried at a run down the graded roadway and flung unceremoniously into a waiting automobile. Only two connected sentences had she heard the whole while: a muttered, "Easy with her, Steele!" when she had been swept clear of the ground; a sharp, "Go ahead!" when she was bundled into the car.

So this again was the work of Bill Steele! That was her first clear thought through the murk of frightened anger. Was the man mad? Were there no limits to his lawless desperation? Did he think that in a day like today there was scope for the reckless play which this attack spelled?

In front of her a man sat stooped over his wheel,

driving the big car on with growing speed, with eyes only for the road which his lamps retrieved from the dark. At each side of her was another man, an arm run through hers. The three men, their faces hidden from her, were as silent as the sleeping world through which they sped.

After her first frantic buffeting with superior force she had grown very quiet; after the first surge of fear had come anger to be followed by cool, calculating thought.

Now, no matter what appearances were or might be, she was suddenly assured of one fact which startled, then thrilled her strangely. This was obviously meant to appear the work of Bill Steele and she knew that appearances lied! A man had seized her rudely, another had cried, "Easy with her, Steele!" and she knew now that the man holding her then had not been Bill Steele! She had sensed it then even, now she knew. How does one know things like this? Earlier in the evening Steele himself had been briefly tricked by the masquerading Della . . . and then he had known. How and why? Because he loved her and there is a sixth sense? How now did she know so well that this was not Steele's work? First because it was not his way; not headlong, like him, smacking rather of cunning and deceit. And she would have known had it been Steele's arms about her . . . because she loved him!

While she sat breathing deeply the glorious truth flashed into her soul, turning its searchlight upon her own self, showing her her own long hidden heart's desire.

She loved Bill Steele, though she had not been willing to admit it, though she had not even seen it clearly. She had wanted him to hold her in his arms tonight, she had wanted him to kiss her; for one stinging-sweet second she had closed her eyes blissfully and lived to the uttermost with his lips on hers.

"Bill Steele," she whispered softly. "I love you!"

They had turned toward the east, headed toward Camp Corliss. Were they taking her to Summit City or on beyond? Questions to be asked but not answered. For at last her eyes were blindfolded and she knew that the car had circled and circled in a meadow and now might be retracing its way or travelling on eastward. And then, with eyes still blinded, she was forced to step to the ground, to mount a horse, to ride where there was but an uneven trail underfoot. She heard the automobile speeding away behind her. And she knew that now at last there was but one man with her. A man who silently took her horse's reins, who rudely forced her hand away from the band about her eyes, who was spurring on at her side through the mountains.

Then came back her fear in resurging waves. What sign would there be left behind that her friends could follow? How far would the brutality of her captor go? Where was the end of it all for Beatrice Corliss?

Mile after mile they went and no longer could she guess even vaguely where. They rode through brush which whipped at her feet; they made a slow way down many a steep slope; they mounted slowly to other

broken lands, they galloped swiftly through open spaces. She grew to feel the first herald of fatigue; wondered how many hours had already dragged by; yearned as she had never yearned before for the coming of day after this endless night.

And then at last they stopped. The man with her dismounted and held out his hand to her. With no alternative but with a sudden stiffening of rebellious muscles, she slipped from the saddle. Still with bandaged eyes, her captor's hand on her arm, she went forward a half dozen paces. Then there was a rough wooden floor under her feet and she heard the slam of a door. Now at last she could whip the bandage from her eyes.

She was in a little one room cabin such as one finds everywhere in the mountain country. But, so great was the darkness about her, that to know even that she must pass her hands along the walls. She stumbled against a crude table; sought its surface for a possible match and found nothing; passed on; stumbled against a stove; then a bunk against the far wall. There was a small window; she could feel the rectangular opening but found that it was boarded up securely. She went wearily to the table and sat down upon it, choosing it rather than a bunk of doubtful cleanliness.

She heard the man moving. Evidently he was busy with the horses. Then it grew very silent. There was no sound to tell her if he lounged at her door, if even now he was lifting his hand to the latch, if he had gone away.

Dawn came slowly. She had found that neither door or window permitted hope of escape and with a long hopeless sigh settled again upon her table, leaning back against the wall.

"At least," she told herself, "I am nicely dressed for an escapade like this. Looks almost premeditated, Beatrice, my dear!"

For the fighting spirit in her had beaten down her fear; she had rested; she had had much time to think; a growing hope had followed her thoughts. A hope which thrilled through her, which made less dark the night shutting her in, which whispered softly of that which Beatrice Corliss knew she desired with her whole heart.

"I believe I could almost go to sleep, now!" she whispered. But instead she slipped from the table and began a restless walking up and down praying for the dawn, praying for certainty. And, to be ready for whatever might come she sought in the cabin some weapon which might be required at her hands. For, even with hope for that which she did hope, there came many a long shudder that night. . . . When all that she could find was an old broken ax handle, she took it up and weighed it in her hands . . . If only Bill Steele could have seen the look in her eyes then! . . . and hid it at the foot of the bunk.

Since no night is so long as one filled with uncertainty, since uncertainty may grow all but unbearable when fed upon utter silence, Beatrice would have welcomed eagerly the least little sound from without. The moving of browsing horses, the wind in the trees, even

the step of the man outside. So was she ready to welcome mightily that sound which did come to her, a man's voice shouting, the rattle of pistol shots, shouts and shots mingled, and then the flying thud of shod hoofs.

"Beatrice! Beatrice! Are you all right. Oh, Beatrice!"

At the first sound she had leaped forward, trembling with excitement at the door. With the words she dropped back slowly, her hands twisting before her. . . . It was Embry's voice . . .

Embry's hands jerked away the heavy bar outside and threw the door open. It was dawning across the mountains. She could see him outlined in the pale rectangle. In the hand hanging at his side was a revolver. He was breathing heavily.

"So you have come, have you?" she said quietly.

She went back to the bunk and sat down. Her eyes, scarcely to be seen in the gloom, were steady upon him. He came forward eagerly, his hand out to her.

"Beatrice!" he cried. "They have not harmed you? Oh, Beatrice . . ."

She made no answer but watched him keenly. He came on to her, his hand still out.

"I followed," he said hurriedly. "Was lucky enough to get my hands on one of the men . . . they had trouble with their engine, thank God! . . . made him tell me where you were. . . . What is it, Beatrice? What is it?"

"Liar, Joe Embry!" she told him steadily. "Liar and gambler and crook! And cur and coward!"

He started back as though her hand had slapped his flushed cheek.

"You have played the long chance, Joe Embry," she went on quietly. "You have been forced to it and, gambler style, have played the long chance. And lost! If you will stand aside I think I will go out."

While the dawn brightened about them Joe Embry did not stir for a long time, did not move hand or foot. Then at last, slowly, he slipped his revolver into his coat pocket. His face would have told nothing even had the light been better.

"I don't quite catch your meaning, Miss Corliss," he returned in his usual smooth, expressionless voice. "No doubt the experiences of the night have terribly upset you. Will you seek to be calm and . . ."

Her cool, contemptuous laughter cut him short.

"You lose, Joe Embry," was all that she said.

"Just what am I losing?" he asked quietly.

"Me! Me and my millions! What you have been playing for since I first met you. And shall I tell you why you lose? Because you are not man enough to win! When, the other night, Bill Steele played the long chance and bucked your own game at Boom Town he won . . . because, losing at first he but played the harder, because if twelve thousand dollars would not have done it he would have risked twice twelve thousand. Because he had made up his mind to win, and, being a man, he won! And you, Joe Embry, just miss that . . . just miss being a man!"

"Again," he said, though now with the first tremour in his voice, "I don't quite get you."

And again she laughed at him, fearless in her anger and scorn.

"Am I a fool?" she cried passionately. "Fool I have been, but not to the uttermost! Do I hear nothing of what goes forward, and hearing do I not think and wonder? Do I not know now that it was your money which financed that hideous house in Summit City? That it was you and not Bill Steele who put up those insulting signs? That it was Bill Steele who, before all men and in white rage, tore down your handiwork in Boom Town? That it has been for your own ends all along that you have urged me on to strife with him? That it was you tonight who dared have me brought here that it might be you who would come bravely to the rescue?"

"You are mistaken," he said sharply.

"I am not mistaken," she flared out at him. "Had Bill Steele wanted to carry me away tonight he would have done it alone, Bill Steele's way, a man's way! No, Mr. Embry, I am not mistaken. You have played your game, played it to the desperate end and have lost."

He stood in silence, his eyes keen and hard and penetrating. Then he shrugged.

"Have it your own way," he said coolly, and now more than ever did she marvel at the man's mastery of himself. "If you like, I have played a risky game because I have had to do it. And lost? Not yet, if you please. I have not lost and, by God, I am not going to lose. . . . We need not waste time in idle talk, need we? When a man plays a desperate game it is

usually through no mere preference on his part; he does what he is driven to do. I have got to go through with this; I have got to see that in the end I don't lose out. You seem to know a very great deal; let me tell you something that you don't know. It is believed now that you were brought here forcibly. Here you shall stay . . . alone with me . . . all of today and tonight and tomorrow and tomorrow night. Then some of your friends, led here as by chance by a certain one of your guests, will find us together. Then, since it was I and I alone who told the kidnapping story, how is it going to look for you, Beatrice Corliss? What will they say?"

His words had come slowly, clearly and coolly. But swift had been the mounting of blood rushing into her cheeks, swift the blazing fires in her eyes.

"They will understand what I wish them to understand," he continued rather more quickly. "Compromised you will have been already, since they think that Steele has you. Do you wish further compromise, your name and mine food for gossip?"

Readily enough and more than once had she called Steele "Brute!" Embry's words she heard in dumb, frozen silence.

"You will marry me," he told her, his tone ringing with conviction, "because I love you, because I am the man for you, because you half love me now, . . . and finally, because there is nothing left for you; that or a bandied name. You have called me desperate. I am. Do you know just what that means?"

'At one moment red with anger, now was she white

with the passion gripping her, her voice coming harsh and uncertain.

"I'd choose disgrace, yes, and death, before you!" she cried wildly.

Behind her her hand had closed upon the broken ax handle, her only weapon. In another instant she might have launched herself at him, striking with all of the fierceness of her sex when awakened to utter loathing and terror. And, then, at her moment of greatest need, there came to her from without a sound which set her heart to leaping, her pulses bounding.

It was Bill Steele's voice, like some glorious trumpet, shouting cheerily:

"Coming, Trixie girl! Coming!"

CHAPTER XXX

"OUT INTO THE FORESTS . . . ALL BY OURSELVES"

AND yonder, sweeping over the near ridge on a big bay horse, looking to Beatrice's eager eyes like a veritable god of the dawn, came Bill Steele. Almost the first thing she saw was the glint of light upon something in his hand.

Then she saw only the door jerked shut, barred by Embry's quick fingers, Embry himself in front of her, his revolver in his hand, his eyes full of fury.

"I'll kill him," he snapped viciously, "and swear I came upon him manhandling you . . . the fool!"

"Bill! Bill Steele!" cried Beatrice loudly. And did not even know that she had called out.

A great rattle of loose stones, the hammering thud of his horse's flying hoofs and Bill Steele had thrown himself to the ground in front of the door, shouting:

"Open, Embry! Open, I tell you!"

The report of the gun in Embry's hand, the slow smoke curling upward from the barrel, was Embry's answer. Beatrice saw the splinters fly from the door and stood rigid, her breathing stilled.

Again Embry fired, and again and again. Beatrice cried out softly with each shot so that her voice was like a strange faint echo to each burst of exploding powder. Steele would be killed . . . Oh, dear God,

why hadn't she put her arms about him last night and told him . . . surely he would be killed now. And he was not even firing back. Because he would be afraid that it might be Beatrice and not Embry that his bullet found!

Embry had slipped fresh cartridges into his gun, was holding his shots now, was asking himself what Beatrice had asked before him; was Steele down already. And then came Steele's answer.

He had drawn back, had gathered all of the power lying in his big bulk, had thrown himself forward at the door. And, as he struck, the door flew from its hinges, as most doors would have done under the impact of his wrath-impelled body, cracked and snapped back against the wall.

But he himself was overbalanced by his own momentum, and as he straightened up Joe Embry had drawn back a step, had lifted his revolver so that the muzzle was not four feet from Steele's head . . . had fired! And, thanks to a broken ax handle in two tense white hands, the bullet went ripping into the boards of the floor, and the gun itself flew from Embry's grasp.

"Damn you!" cried Embry then. And threw himself upon Steele.

Many a time had Beatrice heard Bill Steele laugh. But never was she to forget the sound of his laugh now. He had seen, had marked Embry's springing forward and had thrown down his own gun, laughing! . . . She did not know that a man could laugh like that! Laugh for the sheer, pure joy of being able to put out his hands and find with them the man he wanted in them!

She did not know that anything could so stir that sleeping, primal something deep down in the depths of her womanhood, that she could stand thus watching them with fierce, burning eyes.

Twice before had she seen them face each other in anger, twice had she sought to interfere, to prevent the thing to be read in their eyes. Now she stood still and rigid and yearned with all of the passion no longer dormant within her to see one man beat another man down mercilessly.

Embry struck desperately, Steele struck, they both reeled back. Embry struck again, viciously snarling, no longer a man of ice and repression. Then for the second time Bill Steele struck as Beatrice had not even guessed he could. Embry was flung back half across the room, his mouth cut by the fierce fist, to lie prone.

The light of battle in Embry's eye flickered and failed and went out, replaced at last by his fear. For one must have sought far throughout the world this morning to have found the man who could have stood up longer before the searing rage which clamoured through every muscle of Bill Steele's body. Beatrice, seeing the look in his eyes, wondered, marvelled, and in the end her breast rose with pride that that look in those eyes was there because of her.

Steele picked up the two guns, dropping them into his coat pockets. Embry rose heavily.

"Joe Embry," said Steele then, his tone curt and crisp. "I have had a long talk with Mrs. Denham. She has told me a great deal, all that she knows of you and your hold on Banks and your damned schemes.

And she has caught a train and gotten out of your way, if you want to know. Now listen to me; you get out of this country inside of twenty-four hours or I'll put you in the pen. Understand? There's the door."

Embry stood a moment. He was hesitating, this man who had always been so sure of himself. Steele's arm, flung out, pointed to the door. Slowly Embry passed out.

Bill Steele, seeming gaunt from what the night had brought him, stood looking at a girl clad in the gay buckskin garb of a mountain girl. She sat upon the edge of a table, her booted feet swinging, a warm colour in her cheeks, her eyes dancing.

"Miss Corliss," he said gently, "we had better get started, hadn't we? Embry has arranged so that a lot of fool tongues are clacking and the sooner you stop them the better."

She looked up at him brightly, shaking her head at him.

"You're such a rough old bear of a man," she told him gaily. "Here with the first opportunity we have for a little holiday . . . all by ourselves . . . you don't even remind me that I am a good cook. You don't even suggest going off to shoot a rabbit while I get ready to prepare breakfast. . . ."

"Beatrice Corliss," he said sharply, his eyes frowning and stern on hers, "once and for all, don't you love me the least little bit in the world?"

"Once and for all," said Beatrice Corliss, seeking to

speak as gruffly as Bill Steele had spoken, "I love you with my whole heart!"

But her eyes faltered in spite of her, her cheeks were already flaming before he had her in his arms.

"Embry thought that I would care what people said," said Beatrice. . . . In the meantime Steele had gotten a rabbit with a lucky shot and both of them had cooked that very small animal. . . . "Just to show you that I don't we are going to have the whole day to ourselves, unchaperoned and happy. And tomorrow . . ."

"Tomorrow you promised to marry me!" he reminded her quickly. As though she had forgotten all about it. . . .

"Tomorrow," said Beatrice softly, "we're going to Summit City in the early, early dawn, you and I, Bill Steele. You may have a preacher there or a justice of the peace or . . . or a sea captain! And then you are going to take a big pack on those big shoulders of yours . . . and I am going to wear this little foolish buckskin dress . . . and we are going out into the forests. All by ourselves. Just the wide world and you and I, Bill Steele! And, Big Man . . ."

"What, Beatrice?"

" Sylvia Carruthers wrote me a note the other day. And do you know what she told me? You great big bluff! . . . She told me that when you sold Summit City to Dr. Gilchrist, you let him have it ten thousand dollars cheaper than I let you have it. . . . You are a perfectly ridiculous business man!"

But Bill Steele had hardly heard. In his brain, seeming to pulse there with the beat of his heart, were ringing the golden words:

“Just the wide world and you and I, Bill Steele!”

THE END

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